Bell's Hells

A Survey of *Love Wins*

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Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins* landed in the media with the slap and splatter of fresh meat, and was seized with all the snarling and tearing apart we've come to expect from something newsworthy. Some said Bell rejected the doctrine of hell. *Time* magazine had a cover story entitled, "What if Hell Doesn't Exist?" And one prominent evangelical pastor bid Bell "Farewell" on Twitter, presumably dispatching him to the netherworld of disfellowship. At the request of a friend, I recently read *Love Wins*, and thought I'd post my thoughts for others who might be curious.

For starters, context is critical. *Love Wins* is fundamentally a reaction/corrective to evangelicalism, which Bell thinks has devolved into something formulaic. Evangelicals, in Bell's view, have a glib confidence in externals—correct beliefs and behavior—which might correlate with the Pharisees' trust in their lineage, tradition, and culture. In chapter one of the book, Bell plays the evangelical gadfly by raising question after question about accepted dogma. It's a mistake (one I made) to assume Bell subscribes to every question he raises. For him, it's more of a way to shake things up, like unleashing a tornado to find out what in the landscape is solid.

Chapter two turns to a discussion of heaven. Relying heavily on the prophets, Bell presents an afterlife that sometimes reads like a liberal utopia: a multicultural society where social justice and sustainable environmental practices prevail (*LW*, 34-37). Bell's views are less about politics than about evangelicals, whose focus on going to heaven has sometimes caused them to neglect concerns in this world. "Our eschatology shapes our ethics," Bell writes. "A proper view of heaven leads not to escape from the world, but to full engagement with it, all with the anticipation of a coming day when things are on earth as they currently are in heaven (*LW*, 46-47).

Now, to hell. Bell describes both heaven and hell as qualitative trajectories which begin in this life and continue in the next. Eternity, too, is not a quantity of time but a quality of being (*LW*, 59). By our choices, we can create hell for ourselves on earth, and we have the option of continuing in this path after we die: "…there are all kinds of hells, because there are all kinds of ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next" (*LW*, 79).

Bell closes his chapter about hell with a discussion of the parable of the sheep and the goats, found in Matthew 25. At the end of the parable, the goats are sent to "kolazo aionin," usually translated "eternal punishment." (Earlier in the passage, the goats are also told they'll be sent to "pur aionin"—"eternal fire"—but Bell doesn't address this). Bell argues "kolazo aionin" could be translated "a time of pruning," and suggests the goats (unbelievers) are sent to be pruned/purified so they can enter life afterwards. Even granting Bell's translation is the correct one, I don't find the conclusion convincing. It assumes the time of pruning will remove what prevents the goats from being fruitful and entering life. But it's just as likely the goats are the "dead branches" that will be cut off and then gathered for burning as in John 15:6—"If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." A time of pruning and of fire. But here again, Bell isn't really espousing this view. It is, for him, another way to erode the false certainty he sees evangelicals embracing. Bell goes on, in the next chapter, to discuss varying views of hell held

by Christians, especially universalism. Universalists believe everyone will eventually be saved, and no one will go to hell. Bell is clearly sympathetic to this view. He says the traditional view of hell "isn't a very good story," whereas "everybody enjoying God's good world together…is a better story" (*LW*, 110-111). He also argues that people shouldn't be ostracized for believing in universalism, and that all Christians should hope no one will go to hell, whether they think it theologically probable or not (*LW*, 111).

But don't be too quick to peg Bell as a universalist: "Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God, forever…? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't" (*LW*, 115). Bell is continuing to needle evangelicals that presume to know exactly what hell is and who will go there. In the second to last chapter of the book, Bell expounds on the story of the prodigal son. He points out that the younger son and the elder son are both at the party thrown by the father to celebrate the younger son's return. For the younger son, the party is heaven because he receives the father's love whereas the older son is in hell because he can't believe how loved he is, even looking it in the face. Bell concludes our eternal destiny isn't so much a question of where we go but who we are. Depending on whether our choices have led us closer to God or further away, being with Him will be heaven to some and hell to others. While this is a radical reframing of hell, it sounds an awful lot like the traditional view of hell—an existence of conscious suffering. As Bell says, "To reject God's grace…will lead to misery. It's a form of punishment, all on its own" (*LW*, 176).

Bell is anxious to make hell an internal state rather than a punishment imposed by God so that God doesn't seem two-faced, untrustworthy (*LW*, 176). How can we trust a being who lovingly pursues us all our life only to turn on us at the moment of death because we haven't accepted Him? (*LW*, 176). Then again, if my child is misbehaving, and if I warn that punishment is coming unless the behavior changes, does it make me two faced when I follow through? Bell prefers a "Love and Logic" model where God doesn't directly punish so much as He allows natural consequences to happen. One can certainly sympathize with Bell's approach. Either way, God sets the parameters of the universe. Can there be any consequence that doesn't involve Him personally? (Isaiah 45:7).

After discussing hell, Bell explores the death and resurrection of Jesus. Life out of death, Bell concludes, is the fundamental truth that encompasses all peoples and all of creation (*LW*, 130). Bell's point is to contrast this "big" gospel with the "small" gospel of evangelicalism: "When Jesus is presented only as the answer that saves individuals from their sin and death, we run the risk of shrinking the Gospel down to something just for humans, when God has inaugurated a movement in Jesus's resurrection to renew, restore, and reconcile everything 'on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1)" (*LW*, 134). Bell is absolutely right that the gospel is often shrunk to something individualistic and man-centered. But I was, admittedly, disappointed at his alternative. Some have a man-centered gospel, Bell expands that to a creation-centered gospel, but I want a Christ-centered gospel, where "Christ is all and is in all" instead of just being the means by which the universe is renewed (Col. 3:10). Only a gospel as high and wide and deep as Christ will do justice to the vision of the New Testament (Eph. 3:18).

Chapter six explores the fact that Christ is present everywhere. Bell equates Jesus to the "…energy, spark, and electricity that pulses through all of creation…." (*LW*, 145). Because Christ is everywhere, Bell argues we shouldn't dismiss His ability to work in people's lives, even when their experience falls outside the framework of our theology and terminology (*LW*, 142, 158). Bell extends the possibility of Christ's activity to other cultures and religions (*LW*, 155).

He claims this isn't an argument for inclusivity but for "exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity" (*LW*, 155). This difficult abstraction assumes Jesus is the only way to God while maintaining that we can't define how or through what means He will save a person. C.S. Lewis suggests something similar in *The Last Battle*: a Tash worshiper is admitted to Narnia because his heart was unknowingly toward Aslan even while worshiping Tash.

Bell's point here isn't really to speculate about Christ's omnipresence. Rather, he is concerned about evangelicals that think they have "cornered the market on Jesus," and deny that Christ can work outside their theological formulas (*LW*, 159). Bell believes this kind of thinking has damaged our witness and has turned off a lot of people who would otherwise be drawn to Christ. I have no doubt he is right. He concludes, "…it is our responsibility to be extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people's eternal destinies. As Jesus says, he 'did not come to judge the world, but to save the world'" (*LW*, 160).

Agreed. We need to leave eternal judgment to God. That said, there are problems with the way Bell makes his case. First, he overstates Christ's omnipresence and is mistaken to equate Jesus with the energy which animates creation. Certainly, the energy which drives and sustains created life is from God but it is also distinct from God. If it weren't, salvation would be unnecessary since all things would already be imbued with God's eternal life. Second, overstating Christ's omnipresence leads him to minimize the role of the church. God is everywhere but He is not everywhere in the same way He is in the church. In the New Testament, the church is called Christ's body, His temple, His bride. These images indicate a depth of relationship not found outside of her. Edward Leen, a Catholic Archbishop, observed that the church continues Christ's incarnation throughout history. The church is as unique an expression of God as Christ was when He walked the earth in human form. The Spirit will no doubt work with what He has when a person is outside of the Christian church. (My own conversion happened while I was by myself, on a university campus). But a person is much more likely to encounter Christ in a church than in a mosque.

A few final observations. Bell uses a broad brush to paint the complex, diverse group we dub "evangelicals." The anecdotes he chooses portray the most insensitive and judgmental subset of this movement: people flippantly saying Ghandi is in hell or telling someone at a funeral that the deceased has no hope because he was an atheist (*LW*, 1-3). While this approach has a "don't be that guy" appeal, Bell's evangelicalism is a straw-man, easily knocked down. Dealing with a flesh-and-blood evangelicalism that holds the traditional view of hell but loves its neighbors and doesn't carry itself like a self-righteous jerk would've given parts of *Love Wins* more legitimacy. All the same, it is easy to find the attitudes and behaviors Bell describes sitting just down the pew from us, or, maybe, in our own seat. Ultimately, I think *Love Wins* is a book by a pastor who hopes his readers will "…keep entering into this shared life of peace and joy as it transforms our hearts, until…we naturally embody and practice the kind of attitudes and actions that will go on in the age to come" (*LW*, 179). In considering hell or any other subject of faith, Bell wants to remind us that mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). Or, as Bell puts it in the concluding sentence of the book: "And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins" (*LW*, 198).