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THE SWORD AND TRUMPET monthly magazine is a faith ministry directed by a Board representing various constituencies of the Mennonite Church. It is committed to defending, proclaiming, and promoting the whole Gospel of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It emphasizes neglected truth and contends for "the faith which was once delivered to the saints." This publication exposes and opposes doctrinal error which compromises that faith and leads to apostasy.

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Russell? For me, it is not a difficult choice.

C. S. Lewis said of Hell, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason."⁴

We cannot make Hell go away simply because the thought of it makes us uncomfortable. If I were as holy as God, if I knew a fraction of what He knows, I would realize Hell is just and right. We should weep over Hell, but not deny it.

Rob Bell is a pastor, and has a lot of influence on other pastors, and not only in emergent churches. And that is perhaps the greatest tragedy in this. Titus 1:9 says this of the church leader: "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers."

It is every pastor's job to correct doctrinal error, particularly in the central issues of the faith. When a pastor actually promotes doctrinal error, this is particularly serious. And it puts a heavy responsibility on other pastors, who understandably don't want to appear to be critical, to correct and refute doctrinal heresy.

It grieves me how many people are reading Rob Bell's book and books such as *The Shack* (where universalism is not explicit but clearly flirted with) and other writings contradicted by Scripture, whose pastors don't consider it their job to enter into controversy. We have elevated tolerance over sound doctrine, and appearing to be nice, over being truthful. As Jesus was, we should be full of grace and truth, not choose one over the other.

We dare not act as though love demands we be quiet about the truth. In fact, Scripture calls upon us to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). I would encourage all pastors to address this issue. Consider going to your pastor and asking him to preach about the Biblical doctrine of Hell in light of all the fuzzy thinking on this issue that is out there, and has been galvanized through

Bell's book. (Fifteen years apart, I spent hours in dialogue, citing passage after passage, to two different highly influential former pastors, each of whose books have sold millions of copies to evangelical Christians. Both of these men gradually became universalists, and they believe most of what Bell is now teaching; perhaps one of them influenced him, I don't know.)

It is not loving to be silent when people are told the lie that they need not turn to Christ in this lifetime to be saved from their sins. If people believe that there is no Hell, or that they cannot end up in Hell, or that Hell is not their default and fully deserved destination, then it virtually guarantees they will end up in the Hell that Rob Bell doesn't believe in.

In the final day no one will stand before me in judgment. No one will stand before Rob Bell in judgment. We will all stand before Jesus in judgment. And it is His view of Hell, not mine or Rob Bell's, that will be proven, forever, to be true.

If Rob Bell is right and there isn't an eternal Hell, or no one will end up there, then Jesus made a terrible mistake. And if we cannot trust Jesus in His teaching about Hell, why should we trust anything He said, including His offer of salvation?

We may pride ourselves in thinking we are too loving to believe in Hell. But in saying this, we blaspheme, for we claim to be more loving than Jesus—more loving than the One who with outrageous love took upon Himself the full penalty for our sin.

Who are we to think we are better than Jesus?

Or that when it comes to Hell, or anything else, we know better than He does? ■

ENDNOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 76.
2. Dorothy Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (London: Methuen, 1954), 44.
3. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 17.
4. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 118.

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Person of the Month:

William W. Graybill (1880-1958)



William W. Graybill was born to William and Elizabeth (Shelley) Graybill on a farm near Bunkertown, in Richfield Valley, Pennsylvania, on April 1, 1880.

To get an education, he walked to a little red schoolhouse a mile and a half from his home—at times through snow and mud.

William's father was the first English preacher in the valley so William learned English before he learned Pennsylvania German.

Graybill was converted as a youth in a revival meeting at the Lauver Church under the preaching of Amos D. Wenger and was subsequently baptized on January 1, 1896, at the age of 15.

At some point he married Mary J. Wingard from the Johnstown District of Pennsylvania. The Graybills set up housekeeping in the Richfield Valley where Brother William was a farmer. God eventually blessed their home with nine children—five boys and four girls.

After Graybill's conversion he was dedicated to the work of the Lord so it is no surprise that he was ordained to the ministry at Lauver on September 13, 1904, at the age of 24. Two years later he was ordained as bishop on November 13, 1906. At first Brother William served alongside Bishop William Auker for two years, after which he served by himself in the far northwest wing of Lancaster County.

During his years as bishop he was on a circuit of six churches. He would meet with the ministers in his district twice a year to answer their administrative and procedural questions. He would then be their representative at conference meetings. His district grew in size during his years of service. Brother Graybill also assisted the bishop in Franklin County.

Graybill was moderator of Lancaster Conference from 1941 to 1950. During his years of service Brother William was privileged to see the beginning of evangelistic meetings, meetings for the young people, Sunday schools, Bible meetings, sewing circles, and an institute for the young people. At that same time in Lancaster Mennonite Conference he saw the growth and strengthening of missions both local and foreign.

As a bishop William was gentle and considerate but firm. He built confidence in his co-workers and received their cooperation. Brother Graybill spoke slowly when he preached but he had something worth saying.

In 1956, when William Graybill was 76, a special meeting was held at the Lauver Church in honor of his fifty years of service as a bishop. Brother William was concerned that one day, when his people met the Lord, they would hear His commendation of "Well done."

On March 29, 1958, Brother William Graybill suffered a slight stroke from which he did not recover. He went home to be with his Lord two days later on March 31, just one day before his 78th birthday. His funeral was held at the Cross Roads Church with burial in the Brick Cemetery.

—Gail L. Emerson

Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens

by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Adapted

Theological liberals do not intend to destroy Christianity, but to save it. As a matter of fact, theological liberalism is motivated by what might be described as an apologetic motivation. The pattern of theological liberalism is all too clear. Theological liberals are absolutely certain that Christianity must be saved . . . from itself.

Liberalism: Saving Christianity From Itself

The classic liberals of the early twentieth century, often known as modernists, pointed to a vast intellectual change in the society and asserted that Christianity would have to change or die. As historian William R. Hutchison explains, “The hallmark of modernism is the insistence that theology must adopt a sympathetic attitude toward secular culture and must consciously strive to come to terms with it.”

This coming to terms with secular culture is deeply rooted in the sense of intellectual liberation that began in the Enlightenment. Protestant liberalism can be traced to European sources, but it arrived very early in America—far earlier than most of today’s evangelicals are probably aware. Liberal theology held sway where Unitarianism dominated and in many parts beyond.

Soon after the American Revolution, more organized forms of liberal theology emerged, fueled by a sense of revolution and intellectual liberty. Theologians and preachers began to question the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, claiming that doctrines such as original sin, total depravity, divine sovereignty, and substitutionary atonement vio-

lated the moral senses. William Ellery Channing, an influential Unitarian, spoke for many in his generation when he described “the shock given to my moral nature” by the teachings of orthodox Christianity.

Though any number of central beliefs and core doctrines were subjected to liberal revision or outright rejection, the doctrine of Hell was often the object of greatest protest and denial.

Considering Hell and its related doctrines, Congregationalist pastor Washington Gladden declared: “To teach such a doctrine as this about God is to inflict upon religion a terrible injury and to subvert the very foundations of morality.”

Though Hell had been a fixture of Christian theology since the New Testament, it became an odium theologium—a doctrine considered repugnant by the larger culture and now retained and defended only by those who saw themselves as self-consciously orthodox in theological commitment.

Novelist David Lodge dated the final demise of Hell to the decade of the 1960s. “At some point in the 1960s, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn’t.” University of Chicago historian Martin Marty saw the transition as simple and, by the time it actually occurred, hardly observed. “Hell disappeared. No one noticed,” he asserted.

The liberal theologians and preachers who so conveniently discarded Hell did so without denying that the Bible clearly teaches the doctrine. They simply asserted the higher authority of the culture’s sense of morality. In order to save Christianity from the moral and intellectual damage

done by the doctrine, Hell simply had to go. Many rejected the doctrine with gusto, claiming the mandate to update the faith in a new intellectual age. Others simply let the doctrine go dormant, never to be mentioned in polite company.

What of today's evangelicals? Though some lampoon the stereotypical "hellfire and brimstone" preaching of an older evangelical generation, the fact is that most church members may never have heard a sermon on Hell—even in an evangelical congregation. Has Hell gone dormant among evangelicals as well?

Revising Hell: A Test Case for the Slide Into Liberalism

Interestingly, the doctrine of Hell serves very well as a test case for the slide into theological liberalism. The pattern of this slide looks something like this:

First, a doctrine simply falls from mention. Over time, it is simply never discussed or presented from the pulpit. Most congregants do not even miss the mention of the doctrine. Those who do become fewer over time. The doctrine is not so much denied as ignored and kept at a distance. Yes, it is admitted, that doctrine has been believed by Christians, but it is no longer a necessary matter of emphasis.

Second, a doctrine is revised and retained in reduced form. There must have been some good reason that Christians historically believed in Hell. Some theologians and pastors will then affirm that there is a core affirmation of morality to be preserved, perhaps something like what C. S. Lewis affirmed as "The Tao." The doctrine is reduced.

Third, a doctrine is subjected to a form of ridicule. Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral, known for his message of "Possibility Thinking," once described his motivation for theological reformulation in terms of refocusing theology on "generating trust and positive hope." His method is to point to salvation and the need "to become positive thinkers." Positive thinking does not emphasize escape from Hell, "whatever that means and wherever that is."

That statement ridicules Hell by dismissing it in terms of "whatever that means and wherever it is." Just don't worry about Hell, Schuller suggests. Though few evangelicals are likely to join in the same form of ridicule, many will invent softer forms of marginalizing the doctrine.

Fourth, a doctrine is reformulated in order to remove its intellectual and moral offensiveness. Evangelicals have subjected the doctrine of Hell to this strategy for many years now. Some deny that Hell is everlasting, arguing for a form of annihilationism or conditional immortality. Others will deny Hell as a state of actual torment. John Wenham simply states, "Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice." Some argue that God does not send anyone to Hell, and that Hell is simply the sum total of human decisions made during earthly lives. God is not really a judge who decides, but a referee who makes certain that rules are followed.

Tulsa pastor Ed Gungor recently wrote that "people are not sent to Hell; they go there." In other words, God just respects human freedom to the degree that He will reluctantly let humans determined to go to Hell have their wish.

Apologizing for Hell: The New Evangelical Evasion

In recent years, a new pattern of evangelical evasion has surfaced. The Protestant liberals and modernists of the twentieth century simply dismissed the doctrine of Hell, having already rejected the truthfulness of Scripture. Thus, they did not enter into elaborate attempts to argue that the Bible did not teach the doctrine—they simply dismissed it.

Though this pattern is found among some who would claim to be evangelicals, this is not the most common evangelical pattern of compromise. A new apologetic move is now evident among some theologians and preachers who do affirm the inerrancy of the Bible and the essential truthfulness of the New Testament doctrine of Hell. This new move is more

subtle, to be sure. In this move the preacher simply says something like this:

"I regret to tell you that the doctrine of Hell is taught in the Bible. I believe it. I believe it because it is revealed in the Bible. It is not up for renegotiation. We just have to receive it and believe it. I do believe it. I wish it could be otherwise but it is not."

Statements like this reveal a very great deal. The authority of the Bible is clearly affirmed. The speaker affirms what the Bible reveals and rejects accommodation. So far, so good. The problem is in how the affirmation is introduced and explained. In an apologetic gesture, the doctrine is essentially lamented.

What does this say about God? What does this imply about God's truth? Can a truth clearly revealed in the Bible be anything less than good for us? The Bible presents the knowledge of Hell just as it presents the knowledge of sin and judgment: these are things we had better know. God reveals these things to us for our good and for our redemption. In this light, the knowledge of these things is grace to us. Apologizing for a doctrine is tantamount to impugning the character of God.

Do we believe that Hell is a part of the perfection of God's justice? If not, we have far greater theological problems than those localized to Hell.

Several years ago, someone wisely suggested that a good many modern Christians wanted to "air condition Hell." The effort continues.

Remember that the liberals and the modernists operated out of an apologetic motivation. They wanted to save Christianity as a relevant message in the modern world and to remove the odious obstacle of what were seen as repugnant and unnecessary doctrines. They wanted to save Christianity from itself.

Today, some in movements such as the emerging church commend the same agenda, and for the same reason. Are we embarrassed by the Biblical doctrine of Hell?

If so, this generation of evangelicals will face no shortage of embarrassments. The current intellectual context allows virtually no respect for Christian affirmations of the exclusivity of the Gospel, the true nature of human sin, the Bible's teachings regarding human sexuality, and any number of other doctrines revealed in the Bible. The lesson of theological liberalism is clear—embarrassment is the gateway drug for theological accommodation and denial.

Be sure of this: It will not stop with the air conditioning of Hell. ■

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From the Editor's Desk



Paul M. Emerson

Apostasy: Latest Twist

By now most of the *Sword & Trumpet* readership has likely heard about the book *Love Wins—A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* by Rob Bell. His volume burst on the American book market in mid-March of this year like a bombshell. Bell, pastor of the mega-church, Mars' Hill Bible in Grand Rapids, MI, has been identified with the Emergent movement which tries to redefine Biblical Christianity in ways compatible with philosophic Post Modernism. Such compatibility is impossible because Postmodernism denies the concept of absolute truth which is essential to Biblical Christianity.

Many evangelicals have been entertaining a "big house" concept that would include the Emergents within their fold. Bell's book, which "waffles" back and forth attempting to marry the historic faith with liberal universalism, clearly creates a major problem within Evangelicalism and may result in a division within their ranks.

A fair conclusion of what Bell teaches in this book is: 1. God's main attribute is love and all other characteristics of God are

subordinate to love. 2. God is not a God of wrath. Eternal punishment is inconsistent with the character of God. 3. Hell as traditionally taught does not exist. Hell on earth is a more proper concept. 4. Most everyone (if not all) will be saved. There will be some kind of second chance. 5. The idea of a blood atonement is dated culturally and is not a 21st-century correct way to view Christ's ministry for us.

Bell has removed all doubt about where the Emergent church people are headed. They are clearly moving far away from their theological roots into damnable apostasy.

Fellow Anabaptists, beware! "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). In view of the fact that some conservative Anabaptists have been deceived by this book, we are devoting all our non-column space in this issue of the *Sword & Trumpet* to this important current issue. ■

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS



A Devotional Commentary



by David L. Burkholder

AUGUST 7, 2011

Samson: Called and Endowed by God

Judges 13:1-8, 24, 25

Our lesson today focuses on Samson, the last of the judges before Samuel the prophet and the institution of the kingdom under Saul. Samson was unique in several ways. He was dedicated to God before his birth and he was undoubtedly the strongest man who ever lived. However, his spiritual strength was nothing compared to his physical prowess. Nevertheless, in spite of his weaknesses and faults, he was anointed by God to deliver the children of Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. Read the whole story in Chapters 13–16.

We note again in verse 1 the beginning of another cycle of sin, suffering, and deliverance. Because of Israel's unfaithfulness, God "delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years," perhaps their longest period of oppression. As always, God had a plan and we note here in this chapter how He went about "beginning to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." That deliverance, begun with Samson, was not complete until King David's time.

Samson's parents were from Zorah in the tribe of Dan. Though obviously a God-fearing couple, they were childless. In Israel barrenness was considered a mark of divine disfavor. In the calling of Samson God lifted that curse from Manoah's wife and at the same time provided a deliverer for His people.

Dan's territory bordered the stronghold of the Philistines whose realm stretched along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The Philistines were more technologically advanced than were the Israelites and thus

able to harass and intimidate them. (See 1 Samuel 13:5.) Nevertheless, with God in control of the situation they were no match for Israel and through Samson God began Israel's deliverance.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife, he gave specific instructions regarding the keeping of herself pure during her pregnancy. The son to be born of her was to be "a Nazarite unto God from the womb." Therefore she, too, was not to drink wine or eat any unclean thing. Another aspect of the Nazarite protocol was that no razor should come on the head of the man. (As we follow Samson's life we see how defiance of that rule caused his downfall.)

When Manoah's wife told him of the encounter with the angel he entreated the Lord for a repeat performance so they could learn more about how to raise this promised, special son. The angel did reappear, but added nothing materially to his previous instructions to the wife. It was in the offering of a sacrifice that Manoah realized the true identity of the messenger. Then he feared. However, his wife put him at ease, declaring that God would certainly not kill them since their offering had been accepted.

So the woman gave birth and named her son Samson. We know nothing of his youth except that he grew and the Lord blessed him. We note further that as he matured God's Spirit empowered him to begin the work for which he was called and anointed. He was God's man in God's time and place for Israel.

For thought and discussion

1. As we looked at the lives of several of the judges, has it impressed you how God used a variety of men and vastly different methods to deliver His people? Why do you suppose God worked this way? Discuss.

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2. Study the requirements of the Nazarite vow. It required discipline. What might be at least a somewhat comparable parallel in the New Testament era?
3. How important is it to explicitly follow God's directives? What happens when we don't? Samson's life is instructive.
4. Manoah did a commendable thing in seeking direction from God in the raising of this special son. Parents, therein is a strong lesson for each of us. The usefulness of our children to God may well hinge on our faithfulness to His will in their training. May God help us to be sensitive to His will.
5. Does it require a "special" call from God to be useful in His program? Discuss.

Lesson emphasis: Strict obedience to God's demands is a prerequisite for effective service for Him.

Key verse: 8

AUGUST 14, 2011

A Life-Changing Decision

Ruth 1:8-18

The events in the Book of Ruth took place during the time of the judges in Israel, which we have studied in our last five lessons. The story of Ruth is without doubt one of the most enchanting stories in the Scriptures. We see in its compass the issues of commitment, loyalty, love, providence, and redemption. Its primary purpose, as specified by one commentator, is to establish the link between Judah and the Gentile world in the ancestry of Jesus.

The Book of Ruth is a short book and should be read in its entirety for background for our next three lessons. It will also be helpful to have an understanding of the times, the culture, the relationship between the Israelites and the Moabites, and the geographical parameters of the story. You should also understand the law of the levirate marriage, explained in Deuteronomy 25:5, 6.

We note in the verses preceding our lesson text that Elimelech took Naomi his wife, and sons Mahlon and Chilion from Bethlehem (House of Bread) to Moab to

escape famine in Israel. There Elimelech and his sons died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law widows. With all means of support gone, and hearing that the famine was over in her home country, Naomi made preparations to return. Our lesson text takes up with the parting scene between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

As Naomi prepared to depart, she gave her blessing to Ruth and Orpah and urged them to return to their mother's house, with the anticipation of finding husbands among their own people. Naomi argued against their intention of accompanying her to Judah and finally Orpah relented and turned homeward. Naomi's primary argument was her inability to provide husbands for them and that it would mean giving up their ancestral gods.

Though Orpah returned, Ruth, however, was of a different mind. No doubt she felt some obligation to provide support for Naomi, as we notice as the story unfolds. She was also willing to be identified with Naomi's people and, most importantly, to accept the God of Israel as her God. Undoubtedly Naomi's life had had great impact upon her and she was willing, even eager, to make some life-changing decisions.

Ruth's statement to Naomi is a classic assertion of wholehearted commitment, loyalty, and dedication. She wanted to unequivocally identify herself with Naomi's people, their God, their customs, to live and die as one of them. When Naomi saw that Ruth was undeterred, she relented and stopped trying to persuade her otherwise.

So they went on together. They caused quite a stir when they entered into Bethlehem. Naomi even suggested a change of name for herself to reflect the affliction God had brought upon her. Their return was at the beginning of the harvest season (v. 22) which sets the stage for the further development of the story.

For thought and discussion

1. Israel and Moab had several conflicts as we note from our studies in Judges. Why do you suppose Elimelech chose Moab as a place of refuge from famine?
2. What do we learn about family relationships from this account? Discuss.

3. What are the several significant things about Naomi's statement to her daughters-in-law in verses 11-13?
4. This whole story raises questions about the intermingling of the Israelites with their pagan neighbors. What and why were the restrictions given by God?
5. Analyze Ruth's statement to Naomi in verses 16 and 17. What all does it imply? Discuss.

Lesson emphasis: The importance of making decisions with an understanding of the long-term consequences.

Key verses: 16 and 17

AUGUST 21, 2011

God Cares for the Needy

Ruth 2:8-18

One of the first tasks confronting Naomi and Ruth after they had settled in Bethlehem was to provide for their sustenance. Undoubtedly they had a place to live, likely the house Naomi and her family had left when going to Moab to escape famine. It is also evident from Chapter 4 that there was family land which Naomi was disposed to sell, likely to provide for their continued living. But the immediate need was for food, so Ruth set out to glean after the harvesters. (Read all of Chapter 2 for details.)

Gleaning was a recognized custom in Israel, included in the instructions given by Moses to provide for the poor and the widows. (See Leviticus 19:9 and Deuteronomy 24:19). It was also undoubtedly practiced in Moab as well. At least Ruth was familiar with the practice and used this means to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. This was proof of her commitment to care for and support Naomi.

We see evidence of God's leading in Ruth's choice of a field in which to glean. It was no mere happenstance, but a choice clearly orchestrated by God. We also notice in the verses preceding our text that Boaz was a godly man and had a good relationship with his workmen. We note, too, in verse 7 Ruth's diligence to her task.

Boaz took notice of Ruth and, after discovering her identity, approached her with encouragement to continue gleaning in his

fields. He assured her of protection and provided for her needs. He was obviously impressed with her character and diligence in providing for her mother-in-law. He also gave her a blessing for casting her lot with the people of Israel and their God "under whose wings thou art come to trust."

Ruth was humbled by Boaz's attention, concern, and provision for her welfare. She realized she was a foreigner, but appreciated the respect he showed to her. Boaz invited her to eat with his workers and personally saw that she was well supplied. He also instructed his reapers to let her glean among the sheaves and to purposely allow some stalks to fall where she could legitimately glean them. There is no hint of ulterior motives in Boaz's actions. It is simply proof of his godly character and observance of the Law of God. In fact it was at Naomi's initiative that things developed as they subsequently did into a marriage relationship (see 3:1-13).

Ruth gleaned industriously and at evening threshed out about a bushel of grain to take home to Naomi. Certainly that would supply their need for some time. She also apparently brought a portion of food from her lunch to give Naomi. In response to further questioning of Ruth, Naomi set things in motion to secure both her property and to provide a husband for Ruth. Again we see God's hand and purpose working out the details of His grand plan. Though a stranger in Israel, Ruth was to have a significant place in the human ancestry of Jesus the Messiah.

For thought and discussion

1. Go back to Ruth's statement of commitment in Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, and note how the events in today's text fit into that statement.
2. Did Ruth, a Moabitess, have a legitimate right to glean the fields of an Israelite? Proof? What does that say about God?
3. What are some Biblical ways we in our day can provide for the poor and needy and widows among us? Discuss.
4. This may be a good place to discuss employer/employee relationships. What are some principles to follow?
5. There are a number of worthy principles exhibited in this text: *honest toil*,

diligence, concern, respect, benevolence, etc. Explore them and discuss them as you have time.

Lesson emphasis: To see how God provides for those who put their trust in Him.

Key verse: 12

AUGUST 28, 2011

God Honors Commitment

Ruth 4:1-10

At Naomi's suggestion Ruth placed herself in a position that indicated her willingness to accept the terms of levirate marriage in order to secure an heir for Naomi's property and thus keep it in the family. Though the customs of the time may seem strange to us, God had established laws to protect the vulnerable and secure their inheritance. In this situation, God was bringing together two righteous people in order to provide for another and, eventually, to bless the world through their posterity.

Boaz was a man of action. After Ruth revealed her intentions he wasted no time in following through with his responsibilities. True to his word, and Naomi's prediction, he went to the city gate the next morning to set things in motion. He gathered a group of witnesses, hailed the first-in-line kinsman, and stated the case.

At first the near kinsman proposed to buy the land of Elimelech from Naomi. However, when he discovered the details of the deal, that it would also involve marrying Ruth and engendering a male heir to keep the land in Elimelech's family, he refused. He would have eventually lost title to the land and he would immediately incur the responsibility to support both Ruth and Naomi. Practical considerations apparently overrode legal responsibilities. He deferred to Boaz who was obviously hoping for it to turn out this way, and was prepared to accept the full obligations of the deal (see Deut. 25:5, 6).

In lieu of a formal document to verify a land transaction, here the right of ownership was evidenced by the giving of a shoe from the one relinquishing property to the one purchasing it. This signified the giving

up of the right of the seller to walk on the land being transferred as though it were still his own. Again, instead of a formal court document, the transaction was attested by the ten city elders who witnessed the exchange.

Boaz made it very clear to the witnesses exactly what he was doing. He was accepting responsibility for all that had been Elimelech's, Mahlon's, and Chilion's, implying the support of Naomi, and marrying Mahlon's widow Ruth to raise up an heir to Elimelech's property. He was a man of noble character, doing a noble deed for the benefit of others than himself. The land Boaz was purchasing would eventually revert to the firstborn son of his union with Ruth. He was also assuming responsibility to protect Ruth from a potential life of poverty.

As you read on to the end of the chapter you see the blessing given by the city elders to this transaction and upon Ruth, wishing for her much posterity. We note how the Lord blessed this union and honored Ruth's commitment to espouse the God of Israel as her own. We see, too, that God chose through her to bless the entire scope of humanity by including her in the earthly lineage of His Son, Jesus, the Messiah Redeemer (see Ruth 4:17 and Matthew 1:5, 6).

For thought and discussion

1. What does God's choice of Ruth, a stranger in Israel, to be in the earthly lineage of the Messiah suggest about God's sovereignty? Discuss.
2. Why was it important for land in Israel to be kept in the family? What do we learn from the Book of Ruth? Discuss.
3. What is the role of a witness to a transaction?
4. There are a number of Biblical personal character traits exemplified in the Book of Ruth. Explore them.
5. What is our responsibility to the needy and helpless among us? To what extent should our compassion reach? Who is primarily responsible? Perhaps class discussion on these issues could lead to deeper involvement in areas of need both near and far.

Lesson emphasis: God honors commitments and noble character.

Key verses: 9 and 10

Newslines . . .

by Hans Mast

incidents events occurrences facts illustrations episodes committees vignettes proceedings problems
experiences crises adventures transactions meetings tragedies scoops reports conferences happenings
bulletins questions reports affairs dramas encounters personages actions tidings et cetera

Osama bin Laden Killed

There have been many and varied reactions to a raid by U.S. Navy SEALs (an elite special forces unit) into Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda and the architect of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in which 3,000 people were killed. There was dancing and great rejoicing in New York City's Times Square and angry demonstrations in Iran. Liberal Mennonites condemned the rejoicing. What is a Christian response?

There is a very big difference in the way mainstream evangelicals approach Osama's death and Anabaptists approach Osama's death, but it is wrong and damaging to simply choose the polar opposite of the evangelicals' response.

I believe a Biblical response is something along the lines of: God is a God of justice and He has ordained the government to punish the evildoer with the sword. His law written on our hearts means that there is a sense of relief and rejoicing when evil is punished. However, He has also called us to love our enemies, so we should feel a sense of sadness at Osama's passing into Hell (presumably, if he did not repent)—God loved Osama and it hurt God to send Him to Hell for eternity. If we have the heart of God, we will feel that pain. However, along with that sorrow, we can also rejoice in the fact that we know God sovereignly extended to Osama a perfect combination of mercy and justice, allowing him the opportunity to repent, which he did not take. Osama will not be able to stand before God on judgment day and say that God's judgment is not fair and mercy-filled because the SEALs ended his life prematurely. God extends the grace-filled opportunity of repentance to every single person.

A passage that is used to support the idea

of rejoicing at Osama's death is Proverbs 11:10 (NASB): "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, And when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting." However, beyond noting the fact that this is descriptive not prescriptive, it is also helpful to remember that this is given in the Old Dispensation. I trust that we no longer follow the Old Testament law in such areas as tassels on our garments, sabbath, or levirate marriage either.

I believe a useful passage that can serve as a Biblical summary for how we as New Testament followers of Jesus should respond to Osama's death is this verse that depicts saints in Heaven pleading for God's justice to be carried out on those that harmed them: "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also." Revelation 6:9-11 (NASB)

Here we don't see rejoicing, but we do see a desire for justice, which I believe is an appropriate response for a born-again saint on earth or in Heaven.

To switch gears entirely, Michael Barone writes the following on the governmental policy side of things:

"While we may not know all the details about and behind this operation, it's fascinating to see how many of the things that made the success of this operation possible

were not so long ago decried by many of the president's fans and fellow partisans.

"For one thing, it apparently would not have happened without those infamous enhanced interrogation techniques—'torture,' according to critics of the Bush administration.

"The enhanced interrogation techniques reportedly led to identification of the courier who eventually led our forces to bin Laden's hiding place. Critics of waterboarding and other enhanced interrogation techniques assured us that 'torture' could not produce reliable information.

"They were probably right that sometimes such techniques yield false information. But the bin Laden operation shows that they can also produce actionable intelligence.

"You may remember that many Democrats called for criminal prosecution of CIA interrogators who were acting under orders vetted by legal counsel. Attorney General Eric Holder actually considered bringing such prosecutions."

—Excerpt from "To get bin Laden, Obama relied on policies he decried" (<http://j.mp/ObamaTorture>) by Michael Barone in *The Washington Examiner*

* * * * *

Illegals Get Public University Affirmative Action

"This week, Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley signed a bill to require the state's public universities to give undocumented aliens—generally illegal—in-state tuition privileges.

"The bill, known as the Dream Act, is already the law in ten other states, including California, New York, Texas, and Illinois.

"But critics argue that the bill will give illegal aliens better treatment than Americans and legal immigrants—thanks to existing diversity policies at universities.

"University of Maryland (College Park) computer science Prof. James Purtilo told FoxNews.com that, during his time as an associate dean, he frequently saw admission officers favor students because of their 'undocumented' status.

"They favor students with special circumstances. "Undocumented alien" would be one of these special circumstances . . . They help fill out the diversity picture for

the admissions office.'

"It was just the norm,' Purtillo added, 'that obviously we need more of these students [undocumented aliens] . . . "this student has a real story to tell" would be a common thing the admissions officers would say. Or that "they're enriching the College Park experience." ' "

—Excerpt from "University Insiders: Illegal Immigrants Get Affirmative Action" (<http://j.mp/IllegalAA>) from *FoxNews.com*

* * * * *

Anti-White Bias

"In what some have called the new post-racial era, what constitutes discrimination is shifting. The landmark Supreme Court case, *Ricci v. DeStefano*, for example, ruled that white firefighters suffered discrimination when their employer threw out a promotional exam because none of the African-American firefighters who took the test qualified for promotion.

"A new study by Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers has found that Americans think significant progress has been made in the fight against anti-black bias. But white Americans perceived that progress as coming at their expense and that anti-white bias has become a bigger societal problem than anti-black bias."

—Excerpt from "Is Anti-White Bias a Problem?" (<http://j.mp/AntiWhiteBias>) in the *New York Times*

* * * * *

Two Patients Die Outside British Government Hospital

"Two patients died after being left waiting in ambulances outside an overstretched hospital.

"The patients, believed to have been in their 80s, couldn't get into the Royal Oldham Hospital for 7 and 20 minutes respectively.

"They were assessed by ambulance crews as 'very sick' and were both suspected of having suffered heart attacks."

I'm in South Africa at the moment and they have nationalized health care like Britain here. I was chatting with a middle-aged man (lodge manager) who told me

that the joke here in South Africa is that if you go to a government hospital with a cough, you'll emerge with both legs amputated. He strongly advised that if we need assistance we go to a private hospital.

—First three paragraphs excerpted from “Two patients died after waiting in ambulance outside 'full' Oldham hospital unit” in *The Manchester Evening News*

* * * * *

No Obama Easter Statement

“President Obama failed to release a statement or a proclamation recognizing the national observance of Easter Sunday, Christianity's most sacred holiday.

“By comparison, the White House has released statements recognizing the observance of major Muslim holidays and released statements in 2010 on Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr, Hajj, and Eid-ul-Adha.

“The White House also failed to release a statement marking Good Friday. However, they did release an eight-paragraph statement heralding Earth Day. During the President's weekly radio address on Saturday he did make a passing reference to Easter (combined with Passover). President Obama said, ‘This is a time of year when people get together with family and friends to observe Passover and celebrate Easter. It's a chance to give thanks for our blessings, and reaffirm our faith, while spending time with the people we love.’ The rest of the address focused on the struggling economy.

“However, the First Family did attend an Easter Sunday worship service at a Baptist church and last week, the President hosted an Easter breakfast for Christian ministers. In that gathering, the President spoke openly about the Christian faith.”

—Excerpt from “WH Fails to Release Easter Proclamation” (<http://j.mp/ObamaEaster>) on *FoxNews.com*

* * * * *

News Snippets

David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade* and founder of Teen Challenge, died in a car crash at age 79.

— *Christianity Today*

A baby born in Phoenix was born healthy after the mother defied doctors' advice to

abort because giving birth posed a health risk to herself. Her husband said, “We left it for the doctors to decide when to deliver the baby and God to decide everything else.” The condition was cornual pregnancy (also referred to as interstitial pregnancy).

—*The Arizona Republic*

The U. S. has an all-volunteer military, but there are increasing numbers of conscientious objectors dropping out. Here's a statement from one that has refused to re-deploy to Afghanistan: “There is no way I will deploy to Afghanistan. The occupation is immoral and unjust. It does not make the American people any safer. It has the opposite effect. It was in Iraq that I turned against the occupations. I started to feel very guilty. I watched contractors making obscene amounts of money. I found no evidence that the occupation was in any way helping the people of Iraq. I know I contributed to death and human suffering. It's hard to quantify how much I caused, but I know I contributed to it.”

—*TheInvestigativeFund.org*

Iranian President Ahmadinejad is somewhat out of favor with Supreme Ayatollah Khomeini, and a number of Ahmadinejad's staff have been charged with using sorcery.

—*UK Daily Guardian*

“A MOTHER is angry her 16-year-old daughter had a secret abortion arranged by a school counselor. Helen, not her real name, found out about the termination four days after it had happened. ‘I was horrified. Horrified that she'd had to go through that on her own, and horrified her friends and counsellors had felt that she shouldn't talk to us,’ she said . . . Christchurch lawyer Kathryn Dalziel, who wrote *Privacy In Schools: A Guide to the Privacy Act for Principals, Teachers and Boards of Trustees*, said students who saw counsellors were promised confidentiality, and the service was bound by the Health Privacy Code. ‘When it comes to contraception and abortion, they [counsellors] would need the consent of the person before they could share information with a parent or the school,’ she said.”

—Excerpt from “Schools arrange secret abortions” (<http://j.mp/SchoolAbortions>) in the *New Zealand Sunday Star-Times*

As always, I welcome your feedback to hansmast@hansmast.com.

Rob Bell Book *Love Wins* Stirs Controversy, Denies Core Christian Beliefs

by Michael Foust

Few events in recent memory have caused as much controversy and confusion among evangelicals as the latest book by well-known pastor Rob Bell, who in *Love Wins* denies Hell and affirms a form of universalism—all the while claiming he has done neither.

Bell's Mars' Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is nondenominational, but his books, *Velvet Elvis* among them, are popular among young evangelicals of all denominations and his Nooma videos—well-produced and thought-provoking—are used in even the most conservative of churches.

Bell—a key figure in the emerging church movement—often has flirted with controversy, such as the time in 2007 when he was asked about homosexuality and danced around the issue, refusing to take a historical Biblical stand. Nothing that Bell has written or said, though, has been as controversial as *Love Wins*. The publisher, Harper Collins, intended to release it on March 29, but moved the date up two weeks after Justin Taylor, a blogger and executive at Crossway book publisher, wrote a critical review of the book's premise. Bell's former publisher, Zondervan, apparently refused to publish *Love Wins*, which is subtitled, "A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived."

Bell's views are nothing new and, in many ways, simply mirror liberal Protestantism. It is, though, extremely rare for a Christian leader with such a following among evangelicals to begin espousing views that contradict historical Christi-

anity. The fact that he is such a gifted communicator makes his beliefs even more dangerous, his critics say.

Even the book's endorsements have been controversial. Eugene Peterson—who wrote *The Message* Bible paraphrase—endorsed it, as did Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary.

With Peterson's and Mouw's endorsements, there appears to be a brewing debate within evangelicalism on whether universalism, or any form of it, is a denial of historical Christianity.

Most evangelical leaders, though, say the exclusivity of the Gospel and a literal Heaven and Hell are at the heart of Christianity. Yet in *Love Wins*, Bell redefines all three. He says the Gospel is exclusive—but also inclusive in that people worldwide will be saved even if they have not professed Christ. He affirms Heaven—but says that Scripture sometimes defines it as the present day. He says he believes in Hell—but then says it's not a literal place but simply a synonym for suffering in the modern world.

In recent days, Bell has denied he is a universalist, but his book says otherwise. Technically, Bell may be more rightly defined as an "inclusivist," which is a cousin of universalism and teaches that people who don't even know Christ—including Muslims and Hindus—will nevertheless, unconsciously, be saved through Christ. But on other pages of his book, Bell seems to make clear universalistic arguments.

"From a pastoral perspective, this is the very definition of a wolf in sheep's

clothing,” Denny Burk, dean of Boyce College in Louisville, Ky., wrote on his blog in reference to Bell’s denials.

In a chapter titled “There Are Rocks Everywhere,” Bell quoted John 14:6—where Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me”—and then proposes an unorthodox interpretation.

“What [Jesus] doesn’t say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Him,” Bell wrote. “He doesn’t even state that those coming to the Father through Him will even know that they are coming exclusively through Him.”

Sometimes, Bell said, people who are saved use Jesus’ name but “other times they don’t.” Jesus, he said, “is bigger than any one religion.”

“As soon as the door is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying that then Jesus doesn’t matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn’t matter what you believe, and so forth. Not true,” Bell wrote, “. . . What Jesus does is declare that He, and He alone, is saving anybody. And then He leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as Himself and as wide as the universe.”

But evangelical leaders say one’s views on Hell and salvation will have a wide-reaching impact not only on their faith but their practice. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary President Daniel Akin, on Twitter, said, “If theological inclusivism and hypothetical universalism is true [then] any rationale for missions is gutted. Why go? They do not need the gospel.”

Jeff Iorg, president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., said universalism “denies the Christian faith.”

“Redefining Heaven and Hell to explain away the reality of God’s judg-

ment contradicts clear Biblical teaching affirmed by orthodox Christians for centuries,” Iorg told Baptist Press. “Making the Gospel more understandable in our culture is a worthy goal. Amending the Gospel to make it more palatable is not.”

On Hell, Bell argues that Jesus—in His many warnings about punishment—was not referencing a literal Hell in the afterlife, but instead evil and suffering on earth. At one point Bell anticipates the reader’s question and he asks, “Do I believe in a literal Hell? Of course.” He then defines what he means: “Have you ever sat with a woman while she talked about what it was like to be raped? . . . I’ve seen what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and kind and humane.”

Bell later writes, “So, when we read, ‘eternal punishment,’ it’s important that we don’t read categories and concepts into a phrase that aren’t there. Jesus isn’t talking about forever as we think of ‘forever.’” Bell elaborates, saying humans need a “word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God’s world God’s way.”

Rustin J. Umstattd, assistant professor of theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Bell’s views are “nothing more than a slickly packaged, well-scripted rehash of Protestant liberalism.”

Page Brooks, assistant professor of theology and Islamic studies at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, said Bell’s book is “filled with exegetical gymnastics, historical inaccuracies, and eschatological knots that would even make John the Revelator have a headache.” Bell may say he believes in Heaven and Hell, Brooks said, “but not in the historical, orthodox senses of the term.”

“The primary theological issue with

Bell's book is his emphasis on love as the primary attribute of God," Brooks told Baptist Press. "While this is true, the Bible also teaches that justice and holiness are attributes as well. God's love is also a just love, and His justice is also a merciful justice. In other words, we must see God's love through His holiness and justice. It is not merely a 'love' that wins, but rather it is a 'just love' that wins. It is this 'just love' that we proclaim in the Gospel. If we exalt love as the only virtue of the Gospel, we undermine the reality of sin, which is an inaccurate representation of salvation and a disservice to the full offer of the Gospel to sinners."

Thomas White, associate professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Bell and anyone else who denies Hell and supports universalism "falls into a long line of heretics serving the ruler of this world—

asking, 'Has God said?' and then twisting God's Word with an intellectual sleight of hand that is neither creative nor unique." White added, "We know Jesus spoke of Hell often. If the Bible is true, so is Hell.

"To question such matters is to question the Gospel and Biblical authority," White said. "Jesus died a substitutionary death paying the penalty so that man would not spend an eternity paying the penalty himself. Those who reject Jesus get what they have requested—separation from God. Those who repent and believe receive immeasurable grace. Matthew 25:46 makes it clear that if one is eternal, so is the other. The choice is clear and as old as the Garden of Eden: Follow the ruler of this world or follow the Word of God." ■

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Hard-Hitting Rob Bell Interview Goes Viral

by Michael Foust

An MSNBC reporter's interview with well-known pastor Rob Bell has gone viral in the evangelical Internet realm, no doubt because the interviewer—Martin Bashir—asks Bell a series of tough questions that many orthodox Christians believe have been unanswered.

"What you've done is you're amending the Gospel—the Christian message—so that it's palatable to contemporary people who find, for example, the idea of Hell and Heaven very difficult to stomach. . . . That's why you've done it, isn't it?" Bashir asks Bell at one point.

At another point, Bashir asks Bell if it is "irrelevant" for someone to follow Christ in this life if—as Bell argues—non-

Christians will be saved anyway.

The YouTube video has been viewed more than 35,000 times in the wake of the March 15 release of Bell's book, "Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived." In the book, Bell denies a literal Hell and argues that people who have never professed Christ will unconsciously be saved through Christ.

Bell's evasive answers to questions have frustrated Christian leaders. Even in the interview, he denies he is a universalist and then proceeds to make universalistic arguments.

The video can be viewed at <http://bit.ly/fGPBzm>. Following is a partial transcript:

BASHIR: This book you've written has been stirring some controversy because the implication is, as you put it, "God's love will eventually melt hearts"—that's what you say in the book. So are you a universalist who believes that everyone can go to Heaven regardless of how they respond to Christ on earth?

BELL: In regards to the question, "Are you a universalist?" I would say first and foremost no. That is a perspective within the Christian stream. There has been within the Christian tradition a number of people who have said given enough time, God will win everybody over. One of the things in the book I'm very clear on and want people to see is that this tradition has all of these different opinions—everybody will be won over, some will continue to resist God's love, and that Christians have disagreed about this speculation.

BASHIR: I get that. So is it irrelevant and is it immaterial about how one responds to Christ in this life in terms of determining one's eternal destiny? Is that immaterial?

BELL: I think it's extraordinarily important.

BASHIR: In your book you said God wins regardless in the end.

BELL: "Love wins," for me, is a way of understanding that God is love, and love demands freedom.

BASHIR: You are asking for it both ways. That doesn't make sense. I'm asking you: Is it irrelevant, as to how you respond to Christ in your life now, to determine your eternal destiny? Is that irrelevant? Is it immaterial?

BELL: It is terribly relevant and terribly important. Now, how exactly that works out and how exactly it works out in the future, we are now, when you die, firmly in the realm of speculation. And my experience has been that a lot of Christians have built whole dogmas about what happens when you die and we have to be very careful that we don't

build whole doctrines and dogmas on what is speculation.

BASHIR: I'm not talking about what happens when you die. I'm asking you how you respond here and now. The question I'm asking you, what you seem to be saying in the book, is that . . . love will melt everyone's heart eventually—some even postmortem in death. So you're the one making the speculation about the afterlife. What I'm asking is, is it irrelevant and immaterial about how you respond to Christ now to determine your eternal destiny? Is that relevant or irrelevant? Does it have a bearing or does it have no bearing?

BELL: I think it has tremendous bearing. It also at the same time raises all sorts of questions, and that is why the discussion is so lively and vibrant: namely, what about people who haven't heard about Jesus? What about the woman I talked to a couple of weeks ago who was abused by her pastor? So for her, Jesus is tied up in all sorts of things and I assume that God's grace gives people space to work those sorts of issues out.

BASHIR: One critique of your book says this: "There are dozens of problems with *Love Wins*. The history is inaccurate, the use of Scripture indefensible." That's true, isn't it?

BELL: No, it's not true.

BASHIR: So, why do you choose, for example, to accept and promote the works of the early writer Origen and not, for example, Arius who took a view of Jesus' deity as being not God? Why do you select one and not select the other?

BELL: Because first and foremost, I'm a pastor, and so I deal with real people in a real world asking and wrestling with these issues of faith. What I have discovered over and over again is there are people who have questions and hunches and have sort of, "I'm really struggling with this," and when you can simply give them the gift of, "By the way, within the Christian tradition,

there are scholars and theologians and there are other people who have had the same questions. They have had the same theories.”

BASHIR: But you’ve just indicated one of the problems with the book, which is in a sense you’re creating a Christian message that’s warm, kind, and popular, for contemporary culture but it’s, frankly—according to this critic—un-Biblical and historically unreliable. That’s true, isn’t it?

BELL: No. It’s not true.

BASHIR: What you’ve done is you’re amending the Gospel—the Christian message—so that it’s palatable to contemporary people who find, for example, the idea of Hell and Heaven very difficult to stomach. So here comes Rob Bell, he’s made a Christian gospel for you and it’s perfectly palatable, it’s much more easy to swallow. That’s why you’ve done it, isn’t it?

BELL: No, I haven’t, and there’s actually an entire chapter in the book on Hell. Throughout the book—over and over again—our choices matter, the decisions we make about whether we

extend love to others or not, the ways in which we resist or we open ourselves to God’s love. These are incredibly important.

BASHIR: How much is this book you working out your own childhood experience of being brought up in a fairly cramped evangelical family and really finding that difficult as you became an adult? How much of this is actually that?

BELL: I would totally own up to that in a heartbeat. I think we are all on a journey, and we all were handed things. You were handed things, I was handed things. This is the way the world works, this is what matters, this is what doesn’t. Here’s who these people are; here’s who these people are. Here’s who’s in, here’s who’s out. We’ve all been handed these things, and we spend our lives sort of pushing back and questioning and probing. I think that’s what makes it so engaging. It’s part of the joy of life.

BASHIR: Pastor Rob Bell, thank you very much for joining us. ■

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Book Review . . .

by Rosalind J. Byler

Spiritual Profiling

Author: Tom Hovestol

Publisher: Moody Publishers. 160 pages.

Profiling. What comes to mind when you hear the word? Your impression is probably negative; you may think of racial or ethnic profiling, labeling people unfairly, or reactions and judgments based on stereotypes. The title of this

book may raise the red flag of caution in your mind: is this just another attempt to blend secular psychology with Christianity?

Consider a question from the introduction to Tom Hovestol’s book, *Spiritual Profiling*: “Does God deal differently with people who have different spiritual bents?” Pondering this

question led Mr. Hovestol (a pastor for more than twenty years) to begin a study of Jesus' interaction with the people He faced in His earthly ministry. He noticed that Jesus seemed to deal with different people differently, and wondered if there could be a pattern to the way He interacted with people of differing spiritual tendencies. After identifying eight distinct groups of people present in Jesus' time, he compiled from the Gospels every incident of their contact with Jesus. Finding to his surprise that Jesus dealt with every individual or group differently and consistently, he next questioned whether these early New Testament profiles of people would parallel the types we find today. A group of people from his church became the testing ground, learning about the spiritual profiles and contributing insights from their experience. Mr. Hovestol became convinced that spiritual profiling was a useful study.

The eight spiritual profiles found in Jesus' day are listed as follows, with a parenthetical explanation of each: Gentiles (the unchurched; people with a pagan background); detached Jews (those who were disconnected from the religious establishment of the day); Samaritans (syncretists: people who fused diverse beliefs into syncretistic spirituality); Sadducees (traditionalists: those seeking to preserve ancient words and rituals of the faith); Pharisees who followed Hillel (do-gooders, known for passionate pursuit of right living); Pharisees who followed Shammai (truth-seekers, intent on rightly dividing the Word of Truth); Zealots (those whose politics dominated their worldview); and Essenes (the "super-spiritual," whose approach was inward and communal).

Mr. Hovestol explores the historical background of each spiritual profile and its tendencies to describe their general beliefs and behaviors. Each chapter covers one profile and follows the same for-

mat: after introducing the group and its tendencies, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to "watching Jesus" interact with that group. The next section is entitled "Walk With Jesus" and suggests questions that might be helpful in beginning a conversation with someone of that profile today. Then the reader is invited to "Work With Jesus": How can we make a connection with these particular people? How do we find common ground? What tone should the conversation take? In short, how can we be more useful in representing Jesus to our contemporaries who are similar to this profile? The concluding chapter of the book presents five general lessons taken from Mr. Hovestol's study of the profiles.

I found this book very interesting and helpful on at least two counts: one was the rich detail of its historical background. While I had had a passing acquaintance with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Samaritans, and other types, this book explained more thoroughly who they were and what their worldview tended to be. This was useful in understanding some of their seemingly confusing interactions with Jesus. (I would add here that whatever your spiritual profile, you are likely to see and understand your own tendencies in a new and unflattering light.)

The second insight was encouraging, yet sobering and convicting: to realize that when we present the Gospel to someone who does not immediately convert and join our church, it does not mean that they are "Gospel-hardened" or beyond its reach. Neither is it an indication that we have presented the Gospel poorly, although we will certainly realize that we do not present the Gospel in the same way to all people. Time and relationship, and continued interaction are important. In our day of instant results and Facebook-style relationships, am I going to take that time? ■

Revising Hell Into the Heterodox Mainstream

by Denny Burk

Much has been made of Rob Bell's new book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Before the book was even released, promotional materials seemed to suggest that Rob Bell would be heading in an unorthodox direction in this book.

Now having read the book, I am convinced that the promotional materials were correct. Bell has launched out into a heterodox, un-Biblical accounting of sin and judgment, the cross and salvation, Heaven and Hell. He pictures a God without wrath who would never create a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked. No one needs salvation from God's wrath; they only need to be rescued from themselves. No one needs to have conscious faith in Jesus Christ in this life to find salvation in the next.

While Bell does not want to be labeled a universalist, this book does more to advance the cause of universalism at the popular level than any book I have ever seen.

The following review is long, but it is still too short to engage every exegetical and theological error in Bell's book. There are simply too many to respond to in a review. That being said, my aim is to walk through the main chapters giving you a brief look at his argument while providing some critiques along the way. So this review has eight headings that summarize the eight chapters of this book:

1. Questions Have No Questions
2. Heaven Has No Separation
3. Hell Has No Fury
4. God Has No Enemies (Maybe?)
5. The Cross Has No Center
6. Salvation Has No Conscious Faith Requirement
7. God Has No Anger
8. Concluding Observations

1. QUESTIONS HAVE NO QUESTIONS

At the outset, I want to say a word about how we should evaluate Rob Bell's "questions." Bell likes to make assertions that are cloaked in questions. It is a manipulative tactic that has an air of epistemological humility but which he employs with great skill to make theological arguments. Some have suggested that Bell's questions tell us very little about Bell's views because they are, after all, questions and not assertions. This seems to me an overly literalistic way of reading that suffers from acute naiveté about **how language actually works**.

Do we really believe that all questions are to be taken as literal queries? Is it not true that some questions are rhetorical and are really the semantic equivalent of an assertion? Is not this the way Paul spoke in Romans 6:1 when he asks, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Can we all agree that every question in this paragraph is not a true query but the rough equivalent of an assertion?

This is precisely how Bell frames some of his most controversial arguments. I will let the reader be the judge. Do the following questions from Chapter 1 consist of actual queries, or do they have the effect of an assertion?

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person will suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God? Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few, finite years of life? This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God, it

raises questions about the beliefs themselves. . . . What kind of faith is that? Or more importantly: What kind of God is that? (pp. 2, 3).

Because Bell has already labeled the traditional doctrine of Hell as “misguided” and “toxic” (p. viii), it is not difficult to see that Bell already has an answer in mind to these questions. Indeed, the very way in which they are phrased shows that these questions are leading to a conclusion. Bell suggests that God’s own character would be in question if the traditional doctrine of Hell is true. Thus these are assertions and not true queries. These are assertions about the reality of Hell and the nature of God.

I belabor the point because this device will come into play in a big way throughout the book. Chapter 4 (“Does God Get What God Wants?”), for instance, is filled with a bevy of leading questions that make serious and subversive theological arguments in favor of a universalist perspective (pp. 97-98; 102-103).

We have all felt the sting of a deceptive rhetorical question. After all, it was Satan who tempted Eve with the line, “Has God really said?” Though rhetorical questions can be used for good or for ill, I think Bell uses them mainly for the latter.

2. HEAVEN HAS NO SEPARATION

Chapter 2 is Bell’s take on Heaven, and it is not quite the place where the sheep are separated from the goats. Bell wants to make his case Biblically, but his use of Scripture suffers from a myopic word-study approach to constructing doctrine. I am all for word studies, but there is much more to doing theology than collating lists of meanings for Biblical words (and occasionally slipping in novel meanings that no one has ever heard of!). Yet this is precisely how Bell approaches serious theological questions. Bell’s treatment of Heaven (and Hell) begins and ends with word studies on those terms—as if the doctrine of Heaven can be summed up in the various usages of the Greek and Hebrew terms that are commonly glossed in English as *Heaven*, *eternal*, etc.

Bell is most interested in what Jesus means by the word *Heaven*. After giving the range of possible meanings for the term in Jesus’ speech, he argues that Heaven only sometimes refers to that place where people go in the afterlife (or this life). He writes:

Heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be (p. 42).

This seems to suggest that Heaven can be any place where there is obedience and justice. Yet the world will not experience perfect obedience and justice in this age, so believers look forward to a future age in which Heaven comes down to earth.

What Jesus taught, what the prophets taught, what all of Jewish tradition pointed to, and what Jesus lived in anticipation of was the day when earth and Heaven would be one. . . . The day when earth and Heaven will be the same place (pp. 42, 43).

Heaven can be right here right now, or it can be future. In the eternal state, however, Heaven and earth will no longer be separated.

Having said that, Bell confuses the eternal state with the final judgment. In Bell’s view, the flames of God’s judgment are present in “Heaven”—in the place where believers enjoy eternal life. Bell argues from 1 Corinthians 3 that the day of judgment will “bring everything to light” and “reveal it with fire” (p. 49). The fire from Heaven will “test the quality of each person’s work” (p. 49).

Yet Bell’s use of Scripture is usually facile, and it certainly is in the case of 1 Corinthians 3. What Paul intends as a narrow word about gospel ministers and their fruits, Bell turns into a paradigmatic description of every person’s experience at the final judgment. Those who do not contribute to God’s shalom now “will suffer loss but yet will be saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames” (p. 49). Thus, for Bell, Heaven is a place where our moral dross gets burned away. But this is not at all what Paul is teaching in this text.

What is the theological bottom line of Bell’s exegesis? Bell describes Heaven as a kind of purgatory—a place where sins are burned away over time.

Heaven also confronts. Heaven, we learn, has teeth, flames, edges, and sharp points . . . certain things simply will not survive in the age to come. Like coveting. And greed (p. 49).

Bell accesses a hypothetical scenario in which a racist inherits eternal life. The racist is not yet perfect when he enters “Heaven” but has to have his racism burned away by the remediating flames of Heaven:

Your racist attitude would simply not survive. Those flames in Heaven would be hot (p. 50).

Bell says that much of the “confusion” about Heaven stems from “the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who ‘know’ everything” (p. 51). Although Bell grants that the resurrection will happen “automatically,” he does not grant that holiness will happen “in the blink of an eye.” Rather, he says, “our heart, our character, our desires, our longings—those things take time” (p. 51). So for Bell, progressive sanctification continues in Heaven.

The Biblical and theological difficulties with Bell’s description of Heaven are significant. For starters, his view of the age to come allows for sin to be present in Heaven (cf. Psalm 24:3-4). While the inhabitants of Heaven will have glorified bodies, they will also have varying levels of sin in their hearts. Bell’s view runs roughshod over Biblical texts that indicate that it is not merely resurrection/glorification of the body that happens “in the twinkling of an eye,” but also final victory over the power and presence of sin in the life of the Christian (1 Corinthians 15:56-57; cf. 1 John 3:2). Bell’s view also allows the possibility for the impenitent to become penitent in Heaven. In other words, it allows for post-mortem salvation/conversion, a theological staple for Christian universalists.

In this chapter, Bell introduces a definition for the Greek word *aion*, which he says can refer to a period of time or “to a particular *intensity of experience that transcends time*” (p. 57). This is important because Bell views “eternal” not as an unending pro-

gression of days and years into the future, but “eternal” pertains to an intensity of experience. This definition will play a big role in Bell’s explanation of Hell.

3. HELL HAS NO FURY

Chapter 3 is the chapter on Hell, and it too suffers from the word-study approach that characterized the previous chapter. In this chapter, however, Bell really zeroes-in on Jesus’ use of the single term *Gehenna*. Here and elsewhere, Bell seems to place a hermeneutical priority on the words of Jesus. So Bell questions the traditional view of Hell with: “Is that what Jesus taught?” (p. 64). His narrow word-study focus on the words of Jesus end up giving a truncated vision of the total Biblical teaching concerning the wrath of God. In fact, there is no place at all for the punitive wrath of God in Bell’s doctrine of Hell (e.g., Romans 2:5).

Bell says that he believes in a “literal Hell” (p. 71). But the Hell that he believes in is nothing like the Biblical doctrine that Christians have held to over the centuries. For Bell, Hell is simply God giving us what we want (p. 72). He does not mean that eschatologically, but immediately. Bell’s Hell is a place where human evil reigns and thereby causes human suffering. One can be in Hell now, and one can be in Hell in the afterlife.

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 (p. 79).

Whenever or wherever a person rejects their God-given “goodness and humanity,” Hell is on the scene. So yes he believes in a Hell, just not the Biblical one.

Gone from Bell is any notion of Hell as a place of God’s wrath. In fact, Bell goes to great lengths to show that Scriptural passages referring to “judgment and punishment” do not really refer to God’s wrath in Hell (p. 79). When Jesus warned of the “coming wrath,” He only meant to warn Jews against revolting against Roman occupiers (pp. 80, 81). It

was Rome's wrath, not God's wrath.

For Bell, Hell is not like the Hotel California. You can check into Hell any time you like, and then you are free to leave. He points to the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Biblical paradigm of human evil under God's judgment. He notes that Ezekiel 16 says that the fortunes of Sodom and Gomorrah will be restored (pp. 83-84) and that even Jesus says in Matthew 10 that there is still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah (pp. 84, 85). God's judgment against sin can never be permanent because God aims to restore all things. He writes,

No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever (p. 86).

Bell says that Biblical warnings about "eternal punishment" are not what they appear to be. He argues that "eternal" (Greek, *aion*) does not mean "forever." Rather, *eternal* denotes "intensity of experience" (p. 91). So when Jesus speaks of "eternal punishment" in Matthew 25:46, He is talking about a limited period of time of *intense pruning* that aims to restore the sinner to eternal life. For Bell, Hell is not eternal punishment, but temporary discipline. He writes,

Failure, we see again and again, isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction (p. 88).

Bell's definition of *aion* as a limited period of time of *intense experience* is highly problematic. In Matthew 25:46, Jesus' warning about eternal punishment has a context that Bell fails to mention. There is a separation of sheep from the goats. The goats enter into "eternal punishment" and the sheep into "eternal life." Is Bell suggesting that "eternal life" is also temporary intense experience? This is shoddy exegesis on Bell's part that results in a massive theological error that would put a stopwatch on Heaven.

So in Bell's view, Hell really hath no fury. It is not a place of where sinners experience

the punitive wrath of God forever. It is a place where sinners experience the temporary, loving correction of a Father. If there was ever an example of someone not leaving room for the wrath of God, this is it (Romans 12:19).

So, yes. Bell believes in "Hell"—a Hell so redefined that it no longer resembles what the Bible actually teaches. There are lots of ways to reject Biblical teaching. This is rejection by redefinition.

4. GOD HAS NO ENEMIES (MAYBE?)

Chapter 4 ("Does God Get What God Wants?") is a chapter like no other chapter I have ever read. At the heart of it is a contradiction that is impossible to reconcile. Bell begins by quoting 1 Timothy 2:2, and then he asks a question:

"God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2). So does God get what God wants? (p. 97)

Bell answers the question in the affirmative by marshalling a string of Biblical texts that he thinks support a universal and salvific restoration of all things to God. He even suggests that if God does not save everyone that God has somehow "failed" (p. 98) and is not as great and powerful as He is made out to be in the Bible.

So does God get what God wants?

How great is God?

Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do,

or kind of great,

great most of the time,

but in this,

the fate of billions of people,

not totally great.

Sort of great.

A little great (pp. 97, 98).

The foregoing paragraph begins with a rhetorical question to which the presumed answer is *yes*. Later in the chapter, there are a string of other rhetorical questions that favor a kind of universalist perspective. I quote at length:

Is history tragic?

Have billions of people been created only to spend eternity in conscious punish-

*ment and torment, suffering infinitely
 for the finite sins they committed in the
 few years they spent on earth?
 Is our future uncertain,
 or will God take care of us?
 Are we safe?
 Are we secure?
 Or are we on our own?
 Is God our friend, our provider, our pro-
 tector, our father—or is God the kind of
 judge who may in the end declare that
 we deserve to spend forever separated
 from our Father?
 Is God like the characters in a story Jesus
 would tell, . . .
 or, in the end, will God give up?
 Will “all the ends of the earth” come, as
 God has decided, or only some?
 Will all feast as it’s promised in Psalm 22,
 or only a few?
 Will everybody be given a new heart,
 or only a limited number of people?
 Will God, in the end, settle, saying:
 “Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot,
 and sometimes you just have to be okay
 with failure”?
 Will God shrug God-size shoulders and
 say,
 “You can’t always get what you want”?
 (pp. 102, 103).*

Bell says that God’s goal is to save every human being who has ever lived and who ever will live and that God will never give up this goal.

God has a purpose. A desire. A goal. And God never stops pursuing it. . . . The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn’t give up until everything that was lost is found. This God simply doesn’t give up. Ever (p. 101).

God may have enemies now, but that will not always be the case. God will pursue His enemies even in the age to come until they repent and are reconciled. God will do this, and nothing can thwart God. He will not give up until every one of his enemies is converted.

If that were the end of the chapter, we would conclude that Rob Bell is an unabashed universalist. But here is where the contradiction seeps in. After a *tour de force* in favor of universalism, after listing text after text teaching God’s inability to fail in His purpose to save all, Bell says that

sometimes God fails at saving all. Because God will not “hijack the human heart” and violate human free will (p. 104), some people may remain recalcitrant in their rebellion against God in the afterlife. Bell allows that some people will remain in Hell for a very long time, though it is not clear if he thinks they will be there forever (pp. 113, 114). I think he at least leaves the “forever” part as a possibility.

In my view, this argument is hopelessly inconsistent. God either will fail in His purpose to save all or He will not. Bell cannot have it both ways, but he certainly tries. This section of the book will allow Bell to say “I am not a universalist.” Even though his heart is clearly with the universalist position, he gives himself a back door to deny it. This is why Bell’s teaching is so subversive. He presents one of the most compelling cases in favor of universalism that one will ever read in a popular book while denying that he is one himself. From a pastoral perspective, this is the very definition of a wolf in sheep’s clothing (cf. Acts 20:29-30).

5. THE CROSS HAS NO CENTER

Chapter 5 is Bell’s take on the Gospel—a message about “Dying to Live.” Bell describes the various metaphors in Scripture that are used to depict the meaning of Christ’s atoning work. He writes,

*What happened on the cross is like . . .
 a defendant going free,
 a relationship being reconciled,
 something lost being redeemed,
 a battle being won,
 a final sacrifice being offered,
 so that no one ever has to offer another one
 again,
 an enemy being loved” (p. 128).*

Bell says that none of these images are central, and he even suggests that some of them may not have much relevance for the modern reader. In particular, Bell questions the relevance of the imagery about Jesus dying as a sacrifice to pay for sins.

This is especially crucial in light of how many continue to use the sacrificial metaphor in our modern world. There’s

nothing wrong with talking and singing about how the "Blood will never lose its power" and "Nothing but the blood will save us." Those are powerful metaphors. But we don't live any longer in a culture in which people offer animal sacrifices to the gods. People did live that way for thousands of years, and there are pockets of primitive cultures around the world that do continue to understand sin, guilt, and atonement in those ways. But most of us don't (p. 129).

For those with ears to hear, this is a subtle jab at penal substitutionary atonement as the central meaning of the cross. Never mind the fact that Paul says that God put Jesus forward on the cross as a wrath-bearing sacrifice for sins (Romans 3:25). Never mind Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus would be "smitten of God" and that God Himself put Jesus forward as an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:4, 10). Bell rejects this view of Christ's atoning work as irrelevant in the modern world. The view of Christ's sacrificial death is a quaint accommodation to the superstitions of the original readers of Scripture. And just like that, Bell dismisses the innermost meaning of the cross.

This review is not the place to defend a position on the atonement. That has already been done ably by others. I simply point this out as another reason that Bell is an unreliable guide when it comes to the most important doctrines of the Bible.

6. SALVATION HAS NO CONSCIOUS FAITH REQUIREMENT

Chapter 6 is Bell's attempt to explain how people can have eternal life while never having conscious faith in Jesus Christ in this life. He affirms that salvation only comes through Jesus, but he also affirms that people need not know that to be saved. Even though Jesus says in John 14:6 that "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me," Jesus does not specify that people have to know Jesus in order to be saved by Him.

What [Jesus] doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Him.

He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through Him will even know that they are coming exclusively through Him (p. 154).

So Bell makes the case for inclusivism. People respond to whatever light they have, and that can lead them to Christ. Sometimes the light comes through other religions.

There is inclusivity. The kind that is open to all religions, the kind that trusts that good people will get in, that there is only one mountain, but it has many paths. This inclusivity assumes that as long as your heart is fine or your actions measure up, you'll be okay (p. 155).

No doubt it is this inclusivism that causes Bell to question the possibility that Gandhi might be in Hell (p. 1). One need not be a Christian to be saved by Christ. One only need to live a good life within the light one has received. Once again, there is a contradiction here. Bell still says it is important to believe in Jesus, but the urgency of doing so certainly is diminished if Bell's framework is accepted. This kind of doctrine is way out of step with Scripture (not least John 14:6 in context), and it kills fervency for evangelism and missions.

7. GOD HAS NO ANGER

In Chapter 7, Bell tries to convince readers that God is not angry. You may have heard that He is angry about sin (or something like that), but that is not at all what He is really like. A God of love cannot be one who would create Hell as a place of eternal conscious punishment. God is not like that. Those who describe God in that way are actually driving people away from Jesus.

*Because if something is wrong with your God,
if your God is loving one second and cruel the next,
if your God will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years,
no amount of clever marketing
or compelling language
or good music
or great coffee
will be able to disguise
that one, true, glaring, untenable,
unacceptable, awful reality (p. 175).*

As the title of the chapter suggests, “the good news is better than that” God.

Many people have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let’s be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God (p. 182).

Here Bell lays his cards on the table. He does not believe that Jesus died to rescue us from the wrath of God. The notion that God would have wrath toward His creatures is an unconscionable suggestion to Bell. He does not like this version of the Gospel (which happens to be the historic evangelical position) because he does not like this version of God.

8. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Bell presses the boundary issue in this book. Even though he does not want to be labeled a universalist, he clearly wants universalism to be seen as a legitimate, orthodox option for Christians (p. 109-110). Yet universalism is anything but orthodox. It was condemned as a heresy at the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553), and Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants all eschew the idea that ultimately Hell will be empty with all people eventually inheriting eternal life. Bell’s attempt to enlist Martin Luther, Augustine, and others in his apology for universalism is a real howler. To say that universalism is in the orthodox mainstream is simply an historical error.

Contrary to Bell’s telling of the story, Hell is real (Luke 12:5). God’s wrath is real (Romans 2:5). Eternal punishment is real (Matthew 25:26), and Jesus Himself will be the one doling out retribution at the last day (2 Thess. 1:7-10). Nevertheless, Bell says that anyone who objects to a universalist perspective should at least admit that “it is fitting, proper, and Christian to long for it” (p. 111). Is this really true? Are Christians really supposed to wish that uni-

versalism were true, even if it isn’t?

Though we may feel tempted to despise Hell in this life and to be drawn away to heresies that deny it, we will not always deal with such temptations. In Revelation 18:20 as Babylon is cast down in final judgment, God issues a command:

Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.

And then later, the praises of Heaven break out as Babylon receives her punishment:

Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: FOR TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS ARE HIS JUDGMENTS: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and HATH AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS SERVANTS AT HER HAND. . . . ALLELUIA. AND HER SMOKE ROSE UP FOR EVER AND EVER (Rev. 19:1-3).

In the new heavens and the new earth, there are no people who despise God for creating Hell. On the contrary, there is only praise for God’s holiness and justice. If this strikes you as terrifying, that is a good thing. That is precisely what it is meant to do. It is designed to awaken sinners to the greatness of God, the gravity of His judgments, and the inviolability of His holiness. It is designed to awaken people to realities that *Love Wins* would blind them to. And that is why Bell’s book is so misleading and dangerous.

In the final chapter of the book, Bell shares a poignant story from his childhood. He describes praying to receive Christ as his Saviour while kneeling beside his bed with his parents on either side of him. He describes trusting Jesus to save him from his sins. It sounds like Bell had a more Biblical view of the faith at an earlier point in his life. I hope and pray that he returns to what he learned as a child. What he is advocating now in *Love Wins* is a long way from where he began, and it is a long way from orthodoxy. ■

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Song of the Month

Douglas A. Byler, Music Editor

“... singing with understanding!”

“How Firm a Foundation”



by Keith/Reading

Lyrics: We don't need to look very far to see groups of Christians going “off the deep end,” to use the old cliché. What causes apostasy? Why do whole groups of people get so far off course, even when they started out in a right direction? Is there one underlying problem behind all the different erroneous schools of thought?

One of the common threads that lies at the root of almost all forms of apostasy and heresy is the debate over the authority of Scripture. Once a group of Christians decides that the Bible *might not be* the infallible and sufficient Word of God, there is really nothing left to hold them on track. “How Firm A Foundation” is a hymn of confidence in the written Word that reminds us how we must view the Scriptures. It is also a hymn of comfort for times of testing and trial, that uses God's Word to speak to our weaknesses. Although this text was written over two hundred years ago, its themes are more relevant today than ever before. When we look around and see Christians forsaking the Bible in droves and running to various other whims and philosophies, it is easy to feel discouraged and dismayed. This hymn reminds us that God's Word is sufficient, and offers comfort that we will not be forsaken.

There exists a large amount of debate over who actually wrote this text. It first appeared in a hymnal published by John Rippon in 1787, attributed to “K.”¹ A later edition attributes the text to Robert Keene, while a still later edition credits it to “Kirkham.” Others insist that John Rippon himself wrote the words.

“How Firm a Foundation” has figured

1. umportal.org

prominently in American history. It was the favorite hymn of Andrew Jackson's wife, and he requested that it be sung at his deathbed. It was sung at the funerals of two American presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as well as that of the Civil War general Robert E. Lee. More recently, it was sung at a special service at the National Cathedral in Washington after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Music: This first appeared in Joseph Funk's “Genuine Church Music” in 1832, and is undoubtedly an Appalachian folk tune that he harmonized and edited for use in his hymnal. The melody is pentatonic, meaning that it uses only five notes of the scale. The syllables FA and TI are missing from this scale, taking away the possibility for half-step intervals and close dissonances. This also makes purely pentatonic music easier to tune and less prone to “sharping” or “flattening,” when sung a cappella. Given the primitive instruments and education available to the folk musicians of early America, much folk music is built with this particular scale.

Schools of thought do vary significantly on how to deal with pentatonic folk melodies in church music. Most of the tunes in circulation today (“Amazing Grace,” “I Will Arise,” etc.) juxtapose the original pentatonic melody with normal, diatonic (using all seven notes) harmony. Personally, I think that this zaps some of the life from the tune, and often sounds awkward, because (most) pentatonic tunes were not intended to be harmonized in the four-part tradition. Original performances would likely have been either in unison, or with some type of

How Firm a Foundation

ADESTE FIDELES 11.11.11.11.

"K" in John Rippon's *Selection of Hymns*, 1787

John Francis Wade? ©1740-43

The musical score is written for a four-part choir (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment. It consists of four systems of music. Each system has a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment line in the lower staff. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 2/2. The lyrics are as follows:

1 How firm a foun - da - tion, ye saints of the Lord,
2 "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dis - mayed;
3 "When through the deep wa - ters I call thee to go,
4 "When through fi - ery tri - als thy path - way shall lie,
5 "The soul that on Je - sus hath leaned for re - pose,
Is laid for your faith in His ex - cel - lent Word!
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
The riv - ers of sor - row shall not o - ver - flow;
My grace, all - suf - fi - cient, shall be thy sup - ply;
I will not, I will not de - sert to his foes;
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
I'll strength - en thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
For I will be with thee, thy trou - bles to bless,
The flame shall not hurt thee; I on - ly de - sign,
That soul, though all hell should en - deav - or to shake,
To you who for ref - uge to Je - sus have fled?
Up - held by My righ - teous, om - nip - o - tent hand.
And sanc - ti - fy to thee thy deep - est dis - tress.
Thy dross to con - sume, and thy gold to re - fine.
I'll nev - er, no nev - er, no nev - er for - sake!"

sustained note accompaniment.

Try this tune sometime with the bass sustaining a DO while the other parts sing in unison. If your congregation feels particularly adventuresome, try the sopranos and

tenors on the melody, the bass holding a DO, and the altos holding a SOL. This will put the tune back into its folk music "clothes," as well as describing the "firm foundation" idea of the text.

How to Get Assurance

(Part 4)

by B. Charles Hostetter

VII. THE ACCOUNT IS SETTLED

The American Indians had a unique way of protecting themselves when a prairie fire was coming their way. They immediately burned off all the dry grass and weeds that surrounded their living quarters. They knew that fire could not burn the bare ground that a fire had already burned over. So the Indians felt quite secure even though a ravaging fire was sweeping toward them.

In the same way the Christian feels secure, even though a judgment day is coming. The fire of God's wrath won't reach him because his sins have already been dealt with. The Apostle Peter says, "He [Jesus] personally bore our sins in his own body on the cross, so that we might be dead to sin and be alive to all that is good. It was the suffering that he bore that has healed you. You had wandered away like so many sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:24, 25, J. B. Phillips). So the child of God can be unafraid of the reckoning day because for him "Jesus paid it all . . . sin had left a crimson stain, [but] He washed it white as snow."

This brings us to the heart of the Gospel. The Holy Scriptures are simply God's record of the dramatic story of the divine program of redemption. The Bible says, "God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). This makes it clear that we are saved on Christ's merits, not our own. No matter how good our record might be, we still come far short of God's standard of holiness. The longer we study

the Bible, the more we realize how sinful we are. We can never on our own merit be worthy of Heaven. As the Apostle Paul says, it is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us . . . through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Titus 3:5, 6).

We are sinners by nature and practice. The Bible says, "All have sinned" (Romans 3:23). "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:12). Sin has fastened itself on the human family and we cannot free ourselves. God's Word says, "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him" (Psalm 49:7). So before God could give eternal life to man, his sin had to be atoned for.

It was at this point that God broke into human history. He devised a righteous plan whereby it was possible for unrighteous sinners to receive eternal life. God did not decide to ignore our sins; rather He sent His Son to do for us what we, as sinners, could not do for ourselves.

Martin Luther had been trying in vain to merit salvation. Then one day he read in one of David's prayers in the Psalms, "Save me in thy righteousness." Luther exclaimed, "What does this mean? I can understand how God can damn me in His righteousness, but if He would save me, it must surely be in His mercy!" Slowly it dawned on him that God had provided eternal life through Christ, whereby sinners who came to Him in repentance and faith could be saved.

We were born to live, but Jesus was born to die. The cross is the symbol of the Christian religion. It's the death of Christ

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SWORD AND TRUMPET

that is the heart of the Christian faith. The Hebrews writer says, "He [Jesus] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). Paul says, "He [God] hath made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Thus we understand what the Bible means when it says, "God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). As our representative, Jesus died the death we deserved. He who was a perfect sacrifice was able to be our substitute in the payment of our debt of sin. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5, 6).

This is why time and again the Scriptures tell us that we are saved by the blood of Christ. "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19). "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7).

When you offend someone, to correct it you must meet the terms of the offended one. Sin is an offense primarily against God. Since God is satisfied with the atonement His Son made for our sins, why shouldn't we accept it? Surely if God is willing, upon our faith, to give us eternal life, on the basis of the death and resurrection of His Son, we ought to be willing to trust Him and accept it.

Suppose I owed you \$1,000 that I couldn't repay. Then a friend, because of love and concern for me, pays you in full and offers me the receipt. I accept it. Later, you ask me to pay, but I say I don't owe you a penny. "But you never paid me a cent," you reply. This I admit, but I show you the receipt which proves that my bill is paid. All claims against me have been met, so I'm free.

It's true, some of us may have a hard time forgetting our past sins, but we can have peace with God because Jesus Christ met the claims against us. We don't deserve salvation. We can't pay for it. But since God said He would forgive because of Christ's sacrifice, we must rest our faith on it. If God said my debt of sin is paid, why should I doubt Him? God's guarantee of eternal life comes not so much by what we do but through what Christ has done for us.

I am told that the word *faith* is mentioned more than three hundred times in the New Testament with reference to man's salvation. Saving faith is our part in the transaction of getting eternal life. The Bible says, "The just shall live by faith." Not that faith is our Saviour, but it is the vehicle through which God gives salvation. Potentially our sins are paid for, but payment is not applied to us until we reach out in vital faith and accept our pardon.

Two men stood talking one evening when two little boys came along. The one man lifted one of the boys on top of a high post, stepped back, folded his arms, and asked him to jump. In an instant the little fellow jumped and the man caught him. Then he took the other little boy and tried the same thing. But he trembled and refused to jump.

What was the difference? The first boy was his son and the second was a stranger to him. The son had assurance that his father could and would catch him, but the other boy did not. Many folks, like the second boy, never jump. They don't believe that Christ died for their sins, and they refuse to trust their lives to Him. Jesus says, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40).

Please don't look at your record, but test sincerely your attitudes, desires, and commitments. Can you honestly say Christ is your Saviour? Have you given your life to Him without reservation? To do this will bring you eternal life, and believing it will give you assurance because Jesus died for your sins. *He* paid it all.

VIII. ATTITUDE IS IMPORTANT

Let us suppose that you are attending a funeral today. If the person who had died was someone you knew very well, like your father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife, then you would be acquainted with his failures, shortcomings, and blind spots. It doesn't take us long to discover the imperfections of the people we live or work with. How or on what grounds could the preacher give the remaining family and friends comfort that the person who had died was saved, when he had those failures and shortcomings in his life?

We always get into difficulty when we try to get assurance of salvation by examining our record of works. Rather we determine one's standing with God by his attitudes. We don't ask if the person who died had lived a perfect life as Christ did, but if the person had accepted Christ as his personal Saviour, hated sin, loved the Lord, and grew in his Christian life.

The Old Testament law was a system of works. There was nothing wrong with the law itself; it was perfect, in fact. If one could have lived the Old Testament law exactly, he would have lived like God. Then he would have attained the righteousness of God and would naturally have been saved. But the law failed as man's savior, not because it was imperfect, but because man didn't have and couldn't get what it took to live the law perfectly. Romans 8:3 says that the law failed because man living in the flesh was too finite and weak to live it, and God could not save man by the law unless he lived it perfectly. God demanded perfection. The Bible says, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10). A perfect and holy God could not accept anyone who was less holy than Himself. So if man failed or was imperfect in one place in his

life, he was lost. Therefore, a way had to be found so that man could get a perfect standing or else the human family was doomed. This God did through the work of Christ on Calvary. Christ died for us, so that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:3, 4). Through Christ we have a standing before God that is perfect; we have the righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

None of us living in the flesh are able to live a perfect life; we all come short of the glory of God, even after we have been saved. As Christians we still have our limitations and fail time and again. If we would become perfect at conversion, then there would be no room for growth and progress. I have grown considerably in my spiritual life since the first year of my Christian life. If I keep studying the Bible, praying, and serving, I expect in the years ahead to be more holy in practice than I am today. I have not yet arrived at perfection, and I know I shall not until I have my glorified body.

All this tells us that a Christian must get assurance of salvation before he lives a perfect life. If he cannot do that, he will never get it. Neither is it a matter of arriving at a certain percent of perfection. I am not more saved now than twenty-six years ago when I first became a Christian, even though now I am living a more holy life. If I grow in holiness in the next twenty-five years, I won't be more saved then, either. Twenty-six years ago I accepted Christ as my Saviour; I began hating sin, loving Christ, and growing spiritually, and on the basis of these attitudes and desires God saved me. On the basis that I have those same desires, attitudes, and motives today, I am saved through the work of Christ in my behalf.

Suppose I were sitting in our living room some evening and one of our little boys crawled into my lap and said, "Daddy, I love you; I want to do everything I can to please you; from now on I'll obey you and be a good boy."

Then while we are talking together, Mother calls him, saying, "Come please and

help me with the dishes.”

“All right, Mother, I’m coming,” he says as he dashes off to the kitchen to dry the dishes for Mother. They have a good time working and singing together.

While he is drying one of Mother’s best dishes, it falls to the floor and breaks. Would I quickly rush to the kitchen to punish him for breaking one of Mother’s best dishes? Never; you know I wouldn’t. He was forgiven before the dish hit the floor because of his fine spirit and right attitude.

Now let’s look at the boy in another mood. Suppose he is playing in the living room following the evening meal. He has been stubborn, cross, and short-tempered all day. Mother calls, “Come right away, please, and help me finish up the dishes.”

He replies with an angry, “It’s not my turn.”

Then Mother asks him a second time to come and help. Finally he starts toward the kitchen but stamps his feet in every step. He helps, but is unhappy, won’t talk, and does his work about half right.

Then one of Mother’s best dishes slips through his hands to the floor and breaks. What happens then? I’ll let you guess!

In each situation the same thing happened—a dish was broken, but I wouldn’t think of punishing the first boy, and I wouldn’t think of not punishing the second one. Why? The whole difference was in the attitudes.

In the same way one is not perfect after he becomes a Christian, but he has a different attitude toward his mistakes and failures. God is looking into our hearts to see what our basic desires, attitudes, and commitments are. When He finds that we have repented of our sins, accepted Christ as our Saviour, and are growing in the new life, then on those conditions He gives assurance, even in our imperfect state. It is true, however, that when we have an in-Christ relationship, we have a perfect standing on God’s records. This provision was made for us through the redemptive work of Christ. We are complete in Him (Colossians 2:10).

Please don’t look at your record, but test honestly your attitudes, desires, and commitments. Can you say sincerely that Christ is your Saviour? Have you given your life to Him without reservation? Have you forsaken your sinful ways? To do this will bring you eternal life.

IX. THE FINAL SEAL

Let me picture for you a possible scene taking place in the country of Egypt about 1500 years B.C. It has its historical setting in the first twelve chapters of Exodus.

Reuben was eighteen and Simeon was almost twenty. They were neighbors in the beautiful land of Goshen, a part of Egypt which was a rich grazing country. Reuben had always been a pretty good boy and was very regular in performing his religious duties. He was mild-mannered, dependable, obedient to his parents, and always well-groomed. He took quite an interest in good books, and was cultured and skilled in playing musical instruments. Reuben was likeable and had many friends.

Simeon in many ways was not like his good friend and neighbor Reuben. He was more rough, athletic, and very careless in performing his spiritual duties. At many of the sacrifices and religious ceremonies he was absent, and he didn’t care that he was. He occasionally would curse and had recently taken to some other bad habits. Simeon’s parents were much concerned and prayed that Simeon might turn from his ways of sin. In fact, the most recent rumor about him was that he had attended a wild party with some Egyptian young people and had gotten dead drunk.

Reuben and Simeon were walking one day along the road that went by the farms of their parents. This was not unusual for them, for they were lifelong friends and had had many happy days together while growing up.

As they were chatting, they heard a trumpet blowing at intervals, and each time it came closer. Between the intervals

of the trumpet blasts, they heard a man speaking. Soon a delegation rounded the bend in the road, and they saw that the one who spoke was Moses, that mighty spiritual leader whom God was raising up to deliver Israel from their idolatry and bondage in Egypt. Moses was telling all the people the message he had received from the Lord. He told them about the tenth and last plague which God was sending, after which the wicked Pharaoh would be sure to let them migrate to another land where they could worship the true and living God.

This last plague would take place at midnight on the first month and the twenty-first day. God was going to send a destroying angel over the land and in the words of Moses, "The firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more."

Moses also told them about the only remedy that would keep the destroyer from entering a home and taking the firstborn. He said, "Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover. And ye shall take a bunch of hysop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your house to smite you."

Now Moses and those with him had moved on almost out of sight. Simeon spoke first. He was the older boy whose spiritual record was black. "Reuben," he said, "did you hear what Moses, God's spokesman, said? Since both of us are the oldest in our families, we will die, unless we kill a lamb

and put some of its blood on the lintel and side posts of our houses."

Then the good and rather cultured Reuben interrupted Simeon to say, "I know Moses is a good man, but what he said today doesn't make sense to me. You can't tell me that a little bit of blood from a dumb animal, like a lamb, splashed on our house will have power to save my life. That sounds like a ghost story. You can be foolish enough to go to all that fuss, but I'm not going to mess up myself and our house with blood. In the first place, it's too ridiculous; in the second place, I don't have time to bother; in the third place, you won't find the educated and cultured people stooping to such unintelligent behavior; and in the fourth place, whoever heard of blood having any magic power to save one from dying? The whole idea is senseless. Moses probably misunderstood God. Anyway, I try to do what's right and I never did anything too bad; why, I haven't missed any of the official sacrifices for five years. Certainly God won't let a destroyer take my life when I have such a good spiritual record."

Then Simeon spoke with fear and anxiety. "Reuben, you'd better not get too cocky. What God says He means, and what He means He says. Perhaps it doesn't make sense to you. I don't understand it either, but I believe God, and I am going to do exactly as He told Moses. Reuben, I haven't lived as I should have and you know it. I am sorry about it; from now on, God helping me, I am going to do better. But I am concerned for you, Reuben. You called a command of God foolish and senseless. I would never say such a thing. Certainly what God says is right and makes sense. Just because we don't understand it does not give us, with our puny minds, a right to stand in judgment over the all-knowing God. I will tell you frankly, Reuben, that here is one fellow that is going to take God's message seriously. I am going to fulfill every detail, regardless of what you do."

The self-righteous Reuben turned and walked slowly toward his home. With a smile he looked back and said, "Go ahead,

Sim, paint your house red with blood; see if I care, but I'll tell you now, you'll be the laughingstock at college. The Egyptian students in your classes will really get a bang out of this. Perhaps, Sim, if I had done some of the wicked things you have done, I'd be scared too."

We will suppose that Simeon quickly got busy and helped his father carry out the commandments of God, but that Reuben continued to laugh off the whole idea and failed to make the provision of blood to stop the destroyer from entering his home. What do you think happened the night the destroyer journeyed throughout Egypt? The Bible tells us the answer. Wherever the blood was not applied the firstborn died, from Pharaoh's house down. The exact Bible statement says, "There was not a house where there was not one dead." Yes, Reuben with his good religious record and his cultural development lay dead the next morning, and Simeon, despite his evil past, was living. Why? The answer is that the security was in the applied blood, not in their records. God had said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you."

This is an Old Testament illustration of New Testament truth. The question we must ask ourselves is this: Have we applied the blood of Christ to our sins? If we have, then we can have absolute assurance. The Bible says, "If we walk in the light, as he is

in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). In other words, the blood of Christ, God's Son, can make the vilest sinner clean.

Many people are like Reuben. They don't like Christianity because it's a bloody religion; and since God's provision for man's sin doesn't meet with their approval or make sense to their minds, they reject it. If you are one of these, won't you repent and confess your sin of pride and take your place as a sinner who needs to be saved by God's grace? Just because God's spiritual program isn't understood by your limited mind is no reason to put your intelligence above God's. That is a sin of the first degree, and it is the same offense that Adam and Eve, our first parents, committed in the Garden of Eden. The Bible says, "Without faith it is impossible to please him [God]" (Hebrews 11:6).

When I repent of my past sins and allow Christ to come into my life to be my Saviour and Lord, God can say, "Yes, I can forgive you and cleanse you because Jesus My Son died on the cross in your place, and thereby made provision whereby I can justify and save you." Calvary brings assurance to the believer because "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7). ■

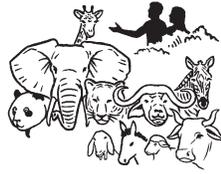
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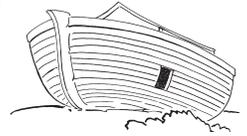
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Beginning Issues



Back to Genesis (Genesis 1:2)

by John Mullett

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2 ESV).

Between verses one and two is where the majority of proponents of the Gap Theory insert a gap of time to accommodate the ideas of man in relation to the age of the earth. There are numerous sources that have documented the significant problems of this theory; both theologically and scientifically including issues such as death before sin and the need to reinterpret the Great Flood as a local or tranquil flood, which have been discussed in this column previously.

Placement of long ages in this so-called gap is often based on arguments centering on the translation of a few key words in this verse and that is what I want to focus on here. One of those words is the Hebrew word *hayah* usually translated as *was*. Gap theorists often say this word should be translated as *became* or *had become*. While that is one of the secondary meanings of *hayah*, it is not an appropriate usage here in light of the context, the rule of first use, and sentence design. Paul Taylor of AIG-UK had this to say in an article in *Answers Magazine* in September 2010. “The word and is a transla-

tion of the single Hebrew letter waw (ו). Whenever a sentence begins with the waw attached to a noun (as with “the earth” in verse 2), the statement is a parenthetical comment. It details the state of affairs at that point, not the next step in the flow of events. Moreover, the Hebrew word hayâh should not be translated “became” because this is not its primary meaning. A translator is not entitled to “expand the semantic field” unless the context requires a secondary meaning.”¹ What’s more, other Scriptures conflict with the idea of a gap here. For example, Exodus 20:11 clearly states that the heavens and the earth were made in six days, not a sequence of one day then long ages followed by five more days.

Another part of this verse that comes under scrutiny in the Gap Theory are the Hebrew words *Tohu* and *Bohu* translated in English as, “without form and void” (ESV). This phrase is also used in Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23. In those passages it is used as a consequence of judgment for sin and that meaning is imported by some and applied to this verse as well. However, the connection to judgment is not inherent in the meaning of the phrase (it simply means without form and empty); the connection to judgment is as a consequence that is deter-

1. Taylor, Paul F. BSc, *Closing the Gap*, Answers, September 13, 2010, Answers in Genesis.

mined by context. The context in Genesis 1:2 fits very nicely with the rest of the chapter as part of a sequence of the earth being created and filled over six days. Some argue that God does not create chaos and the state of the earth at this point represents chaos. This argument is without merit as God clearly tells us it took Him six days to create the earth, not just one. The earth was merely in an unfinished state. An architect doesn't design a structure such as a house, bridge, or skyscraper to represent chaos either, but the shape and design he is ultimately looking for may not

emerge for a number of months depending on the project. What's more, in Genesis 1:31 God states at the end of creation week that everything was "very good." If the fall of Lucifer and millions of years of death, disease, and struggle had occurred prior to creation week, how could God (in light of who He is) make that statement? In all reality, any interpretation of this verse, other than the most straightforward reading of it, is nothing more than a forced translation reflecting the ideas of man being forced onto the text. ■

Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, and the Biblical Doctrine of Hell

by Randy Alcorn

I mentioned in an earlier post Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*. I read it several weeks ago. It contains some good and accurate things here and there, but unfortunately its central message is in explicit contradiction to Scripture and historic Christianity.

Oddly, Bell insists that he's not a universalist, yet his book indicates that he believes exactly what universalism does—that every human being will ultimately be saved, and that none will experience Hell. To teach this and yet claim you're not a universalist (just because you disagree with some things that some universalists think) is like saying that though you cheer for the Red Sox you're not a Red Sox fan, or though you own a dog, you are not a dog-owner. I mean, come on, go ahead and qualify the brand of universalist you are, but don't deny you're a universalist when your core belief is the core belief of universalism. The very fact that Bell can make such a statement and get away with it is indicative of the sort of cloudy thinking that has taken hold.

I recommended before Kevin DeYoung's excellent detailed critique of *Love Wins*. I

want to add my recommendation of Dan Franklin's new and outstanding 35-minute podcast concerning *Love Wins*. Dan is a clear-thinking, Biblically-based pastor at my home church. (He is also a fine husband to my daughter Karina and a loving father to my grandsons Matt and Jack, but that's not why I'm recommending this audio commentary!) Dan does a weekly podcast called Groupthink Rescue, and *Love Wins* is his subject this week. He's also written a more detailed critique, but I found his podcast particularly clear, thoughtful, and easy to listen to. If you're going to invest just a half hour on this issue, I can't think of a better way to do it. You can also listen to or download from iTunes, and subscribe to his podcast, which has other equally good episodes.

I posted earlier a link to the chapter on Hell from my book *If God Is Good*. Someone who read Bell's book and then my chapter said to me that oddly, it appeared to them as if I had made an attempt at refuting every major point of Bell's book. Obviously, that wasn't the case, since I wrote it two years before Bell's book came out. But when I

read *Love Wins*, at times I saw why this reader thought that. I suppose Rob Bell has successfully set forth all the modern presumptions that people bring to this issue, and that keep them from trusting the Biblical teaching about Hell that has been part of historic Christianity. In addressing those presumptions, without knowing it, I was anticipating Bell's book. This also shows that, as Bell admits, he's not saying much that's new. Unfortunately, he is reaching a huge audience, and his book sales have been further fueled by the controversy. But I would rather have more books sell and more people equipped to refute his teachings, than avoid the controversy—some things warrant controversy, and this is one of them, since the Gospel itself is on the line, and not just before the watching world, but inside churches.

What most breaks my heart is that, when it comes down to it, Bell is actually saying "Jesus was wrong." Now, of course, he would never actually say that in those words. Nor does he consciously believe it. But because (as I show in both *Heaven and If God is Good*) Jesus is absolutely emphatic on the reality and nature and eternity of Hell, it is impossible to disbelieve in Hell, and to believe in universal salvation, and actually believe what Jesus said.

Why? Because Jesus referred to Hell as a real place and described it in graphic terms (see Matthew 10:28; 13:40-42; Mark 9:43-48). He spoke of a fire that burns but doesn't consume, an undying worm that eats away at the damned, and a lonely and foreboding darkness.

Christ says the unsaved "shall be cast into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Jesus taught that an unbridgeable chasm separates the wicked in Hell from the righteous in Paradise. The wicked suffer terribly, remain conscious, retain their desires and memories, long for relief, cannot find comfort, cannot leave their torment, and have no hope (see Luke 16:19-31).

Our Saviour could not have painted a bleaker picture of Hell.

C. S. Lewis said, "I have met no people who fully disbelieved in Hell and also had a living and life-giving belief in Heaven."¹

The Biblical teaching on both destinations stands or falls together. If the one is real, so is the other; if the one is a myth, so is the other. The best reason for believing in Hell is that Jesus said it exists.

Some will say, "Okay, maybe Hell exists, but no one will go there, or if they do it will only be temporary; surely Hell is not eternal." But Jesus said, "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25:46).

Here in the same sentence, Christ uses the word "eternal" (*aionos*) to describe the duration of both Heaven and Hell. Thus, according to our Lord, if some will consciously experience Heaven forever, then some must consciously experience Hell forever.

The best reason for believing Hell not only exists, but will be inhabited by people and is eternal, is that Jesus said so in the clearest possible language.

It isn't just what Jesus said about Hell that matters. It's the fact that it was He who said it.

"There seems to be a kind of conspiracy," wrote Dorothy Sayers, "to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of Hell comes from. The doctrine of Hell is not 'mediaeval priestcraft' for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin. . . . We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ."²

Why do I believe in an eternal Hell? Because Jesus clearly and repeatedly affirmed its existence. As Sayers suggested, you cannot dismiss Hell without dismissing Jesus.

Atheist Bertrand Russell wrote, "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in Hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."³

Shall we believe Jesus or Bertrand