

Rob Bell and the Tension Between Traditional and Progressive Evangelicalism

a pastoral book review

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Because of the growing polarity between traditional evangelicalism and progressive evangelicalism in the early 21st century, some pastoral comment is in order. The term “evangelical” began being used in the 16th century to refer to the reforming element within the church. However, insofar as the term refers to the theology of Christian orthodoxy and the experience of forgiveness through the atonement of the cross, the term can embrace a broad range of thinkers going back many centuries before the Protestant Reformation as well as later. The historical distinctions of evangelicalism are more than just a bullet list of theological points, however, and they include aspects of spirituality as well. Still, most definitions would include such things as the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness/sufficiency of the death of Christ for our salvation, and the necessity of personal conversion and evangelism. For the past four centuries, the term evangelical has been trans-denominational and has come to mean the expression of the Christian religion espoused by the Protestant Reformers, often over against Roman Catholic theology. Roman Catholics embrace a both/and theology: faith and works, Christ and Mary, Scripture and church tradition. Evangelicals embrace an either/or theology with respect to these same poles: faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone. Moreover, evangelicals have tended to stress several important themes, such as, God’s gracious initiative to reveal himself over the human religious quest, biblical norms over cultural mores, the cross as substitutionary atonement as opposed to the cross as a moral ideal, and the moral regeneration of the will as opposed to merely rational insight.

Though there is a close relationship between what has come to be called Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, they are not precisely the same. Fundamentalism is essentially reactionary, usually employing precise doctrinal formulae to distinguish between “us” and “them.” Sometimes, fundamentalists exhibit suspicion instead of charity, separatism instead of engagement. Evangelicals, on the other hand, are more “catholic” (universal) in their view of the church. While they reject the naturalistic assumptions of historical-critical scholarship, they value the scientific method and academic freedom. With respect to theology, evangelicals generally embrace the historic creeds of the Christian church (Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Confession, etc.), while fundamentalists typically feel no compelling reason to do so. Evangelicals tend to engage the culture; fundamentalists tend to withdraw from it. Still, the turmoil arising out of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy in the early 20th century is the historical milieu of both modern Evangelicals and Fundamentalists.

More recently in the late 20th century and early 21st century, new issues have come to the fore within evangelicalism itself. At one level is what is popularly called the “worship wars,” the developing tension between those who wish to maintain the older style of worship (hymns, traditional architecture, formalism, etc.) and those who embrace a contemporary and continually evolving style (contemporary choruses, informality and casualness). Early on, the nickname for the latter was “seeker sensitive” churches—churches designed for people who did not particularly like church (at least that’s the way one of the local seeker-sensitive churches have advertised themselves). More recently, a new twist has developed called “emergent churches,” leaders and congregations who accept the innovations of contemporary worship, who also want a link backward into older church traditions, some of them even older than the Protestant Reformation, but who also want to engage post-modern culture. Especially, the emergent churches wish to respond to the prevailing cultural mood, epistemology and social demands of post-modernism, while the seeker-sensitive churches remain more closely linked with traditional evangelicalism.

In many ways, an appropriate analogy of what is happening within evangelicalism can be found in the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The relationship between the traditional evangelical church and the seeker-sensitive and emergent forms parallels this division in some striking ways. Both kingdoms were Israelite by heritage, but the north was more interested in a sensitivity to the prevailing culture, leading them to alternative worship centers and styles, a firm rejection of the older, monolithic style, the embrace of new forms of leadership with charismatic personalities, and the decentralization of religious practice. The south, for its part, is well summed up by the speech of Abijah, the king of Judah, to the northern Israelites, a speech that challenged the northerners for abandoning the central tenets of their faith (2 Chr. 13:4-12). The north was cynical toward perceived shortcomings in the south. The south remained in an entrenched resistance to the trends in the north. In the end, Judah was more nearly in the right, but not wholly right. Northern Israelites had some salient points of criticism that were sustainable, not the least of which were the deviations of Solomon and the arrogance of Rehoboam. In the larger picture, however, the north gradually succumbed more quickly to the prevailing non-Israelite culture, and due to the efforts of the Omri dynasty through intermarriage, they urged their vision of reality upon the leaders of Judah as well. Still, in spite of a wholesale capitulation to non-Israelite culture, there were people in northern Israel who did not bow their knee to Ba'al nor kiss his image. At the same time, there were flagrant violators in the south, like Manasseh, along with ardent reformists, like Hezekiah, Josiah and the prophets. This, it seems to me, is a helpful analogy, not only because it is a biblical one, but also because it makes sense of the varied responses to cultural trends.

Enter Rob Bell. Rob Bell, pastor of a mega-church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, belongs firmly within the trend of the seeker-sensitive, emergent church movement. He often chides what he believes are the shortfalls of his evangelical past. Cynicism towards traditional patterns and revisionism as a form of progress are popular with the twenty-something crowd who, since the middle of the last century, has been reared on the advantages of cultural rebellion. Pastor Bell seems to push this approach repeatedly in his “Noomas” as well as his writings. In America, we now are in the second generation of a society in which the youth culture is the driving force of the primary culture. This social

phenomenon has not happened previously in the entire history of human civilization, where elder wisdom was typically the driving force. Bell's approach sells extremely well in this setting. He is, not to put it too finely, a child of his times. His most recent book, *Love Wins*, is a sustained attempt to revise the evangelical consensus about salvation and the afterlife.¹

Before I take issue with what I think is his shortfall, allow me to briefly address where I think Rob Bell got it right. Bell roots his theological take on things in God's love. I couldn't agree more. Along the way, he repeatedly urges that the marginalized, the exploited, the abused—in short all those persons who are most at risk and least considered—have a place in God's redemptive purpose. This, surely, must be a central theme in any evangelical approach to the gospel. He harangues against spiritual abuse, insensitive Christians, and hypocrisy, and if his language is acerbic, it is no less so than the language of Jesus. Bell has a heart for people—all people. He resents the fact that some have been so severely put off by Christian provincialism that they feel they cannot be accepted by God. I agree with his chagrin. Such stories are most tragic. Having said this, however, I still have deep reservations about both Bell's approach and his conclusion, and I will explain why in some detail.

As the outset, after he sets forth his primary thesis that the story of Jesus is about God's love, something no evangelical would ever deny, he quickly he fires a bow shot toward traditional evangelicalism by asserting that it has “hijacked” the story of Jesus (p. vii). He does not name traditional evangelicalism as the culprit, but one does not have to read very far to discover that evangelicals are the ones in the crosshairs. Traditional theology about the afterlife he soon labels as “misguided” and “toxic,” an approach to the story of Jesus that subverts its real intent and cripples its effectiveness. This sort of confrontational, thrust-and-parry dialogue characterizes his whole approach. To be fair, Bell raises some appropriate questions—questions with which sincere Christians have struggled for centuries, questions to which there have been a multiplicity of answers. However, his approach could hardly be called gracious. He cites extreme example after extreme example of off-beat people and groups, insinuating that they speak for the majority or even the whole of evangelicals. In reality, this sort of caricature is not very compelling or helpful. It sounds more like sour grapes dressed up like theology.

Bell is highly selective in his reconstruction of Jesus. He says that distorted visions of Jesus should be rejected, but he creates his own version of Jesus that avoids, dismisses or simply ignores features in the canonical gospels that do not fit his paradigm, urging that any Jesus who looks differently than the one he is painting cannot possibly be the real one. One case in point, early on, is his treatment of the word eternal, since it comes up in the words of Jesus. Conceding that there are several nuances to this word, he argues that in the teachings of Jesus it does not mean what Christians have always thought it meant—an unending duration of time. (In the New Testament, the word usually translated “eternal” or “everlasting” is *aionios*, which in turn is derived from the term *aion*, that is, an age or a long period of time). The derivative word *aionios* in all translations of the English Bible refers to just such a long period of time or a period of unending duration. Bell asserts that in Jesus' teachings this word does not mean eternal in this sense of never-ending. (p. 31-32). Lexically, his assertion is highly questionable if not a huge error. In fact, the primary meaning of the word *aion* is exactly what Bell says

¹ R. Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: Harper One, 2011).

it is not— it is a long period time without reference to its beginning or ending, and frequently it refers to an age to come which has no end (BDAG). However, Bell does not argue that the English translations are wrong. He lays this perceived error at the door of evangelicals and makes it sound as though they have concocted this definition.

When talking about heaven, Bell urges that we must understand heaven purely in terms of the difference between the present age and the age to come. The present age is filled with all sorts of evils—racism, rape, injustice, ecological carelessness, exploitation, disgrace—while the future age will be free of such evils. So far so good. Most evangelicals would agree. (Almost as an aside, another evil Bell attacks is boredom, which he seems to come back to at various times in one way or another, urging that God and heaven and real Christianity could never be boring.) However, he then asserts that heaven is not about *somewhere else*, but based upon the visions of the prophets, it is about a renewed environment that is quite decidedly this-worldly. Completely apart from the difficulty of deciding what images of the prophets are metaphorical, in urging that we must accept Jesus' vision of heaven, he jumps to the language of the prophets rather than the words of Jesus himself. Actually, what Jesus directly said was that he was going to "his Father's house" to prepare a place for his disciples, so that he could take them to be where he was. He had come from the Father, and he was returning to the Father. One can argue whether or not this refers to *someplace else* or to an renovation of our present world, but the fact remains that Bell's assertions are built on selective passages of Jesus' teaching with little or no consideration for other passages of Jesus' teaching.

Bell quickly draws conclusions that seem amazingly unsupported. For instance, when referencing Jesus' words in the great prayer, "thy will be done on earth as in heaven," he concludes that Jesus refers to a time "when earth and heaven *will be the same place*" (emphasis his), and further, that this is the story of the Bible, the story Jesus lived and told. Hence, the chapter title is "Here is the New There." Really? Where does Jesus ever teach that the Bible's story is about earth and heaven being in the same place? In support of this vision, Bell's ideas of "when the future is dragged into the present" sounds suspiciously like a bullet list of post-modern concerns: honest business, redemptive art, honorable law, sustainable living, medicine, education, making a home and tending a garden. I certainly agree that there is value in all these things, but to say that this is essentially what Jesus was about is to make a huge leap across literally dozens and dozens of passages.

Finally, Bell returns to the word *aion*, asserting that in the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, this word refers to "a particular *intensity of experience that transcends time*" (emphasis his, p. 57-58). It does not mean forever, he claims. Indeed, he says that the idea that heaven is forever in the sense of unending time is "not a category or concept we find in the Bible," and that translators use the word "eternal" to avoid using the word "forever." This is a distinction without a difference. Such assertions are naïve and simply cannot be sustained. Granted, words have nuances, and contexts affect those nuances. Still, no one has the right to co-opt definitions of their own making. Any standard scholarly lexical source will make this clear, as in for instance, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2000), where it offers four definitions for *aion*. In order, they are: 1) "a long period of time, without ref. to beginning or end," 2) "a segment of time as a particular unit of history," 3) "the world as a spatial concept, *the world*," and 4) "the Aeon as a person." Not one of these definitions even

approximates what Bell asserts—that *aion* is an intense experience that transcends time. Bell concludes that “eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection with God” (p. 59). Eternal life, in his view, becomes a type of existentialism. To parrot one of Bell’s own exclamations, “Huh?”

When it comes to hell, Bell correctly notes that the Hebrew Bible offers only rather indistinct pictures (p. 65). He also observes that the New Testament word *Gehenna* is metaphorical (though he skips the antecedents in the intertestamental literature, pp. 67-69). Nor is Bell the first one to treat the story of Lazarus and the rich man as parabolic and not literally descriptive, though his take on the story that by it Jesus was urging social revolution and human solidarity is a bit *recherché* (pp. 74-77). However, by sweeping the mentions of divine wrath into the single theme of political conflict with Rome, he conveniently neglects passages like John 3:36, where Jesus taught that whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him (pp. 80-81), and the biting words of the Baptist to the hypocrites, “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Bell certainly recognizes the disciplinary, reforming nature of God’s judgments throughout Israel’s history (pp. 83-90). All evangelicals would agree. However, when he hints that this sort of reform is essentially what hell is about, he doesn’t offer any serious exegesis—only sweeping generalizations. At the climax, he then attempts to exegete the Greek expression *kolasin aion* in Mt. 25:46, which usually is translated as “everlasting punishment” (so KJV, NKJV) or “eternal punishment” (so ESV, NASB, NRSV, RSV, NEB, NAB, JB). Appealing once again to his definition of *aion* as “intensity of experience,” he concentrates on the verb *kolazo*, from which is derived the noun *kolasis*. Apparently drawing from the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Bell never cites his sources), he has discovered that in classical Greek (which is about half a millennium earlier than the New Testament), the verb *kolazo* meant to “cut short” or “lop off,” a Greek metaphorical way of speaking about punishment for those who violated sacred cultic laws or sinned against the deities. The deity smites the offender with sickness or some other malady, but the sinner can win back the favor of the deity by open confession of guilt. From this, Bell concludes that what Jesus really is saying is that after the final judgment, there will be “a period of pruning” or “a time of trimming” or “an intense experience of correction.” He objects strenuously to the idea of it being forever, since he says this “is not really a category the biblical writers used” (pp. 91-92). The salient point is this: he can only urge the latter if his readers accept uncritically his specious definition of the word *aion*. Bell’s summation goes far beyond his lexical sources. By combining his definition of *aion* with this classical Greek horticultural definition of *kolasis*, he argues that what Jesus taught was, more or less, an intense experience of correction, but not everlasting punishment. He can only make it mean an intense experience of correction by co-opting an existential definition for *aion*. Not a single translator in the history of the English Bible agrees with him.

Bell then attempts to read this temporary character of *aion* back into the Hebrew *’olam* (usually translated “forever” or “perpetual” or “everlasting”). Bell argues that this is a pliable, versatile word; therefore, it does not necessarily mean forever. Actually, the word *’olam*, which appears about 400 times in the Hebrew Bible, generally means “long time” or “for all time.” In this latter sense, it is frequently used of God, as in the “everlasting God.” It also is used of the covenant of Abraham, “an everlasting covenant,”

and of the laws of Moses generally, "a statute forever." Such expressions, can hardly mean quality of life but must refer to the duration of time. What could conceivably be intended if one were to say that God's existence was merely his quality of life for some particular space in time but not the fact that he exists forever? Yet, Bell says "in most occurrences [this word is] referring to a particular period of time" as opposed to meaning forever. If one actually reads those passages in the Hebrew Bible, he/she will discover that Bell's claim cannot be sustained. I would suppose that he particularly may be concerned about the statement in Daniel 12:2, where it says that some will awake to life, and others to "everlasting contempt." He likely wants to read this as a temporary chastisement for remedial goals. In any case, he concludes that when Jesus uses the term "eternal punishment" he is not talking about forever as we usually think of forever (p. 92). He consigns the word hell to the consequences of rejecting the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us...when we fail to live in God's world God's way. In short, just as Heaven is *now*, hell is too. Such a Bultmannian way of expressing things seeks to demythologize the New Testament.

When one gets to Chapter 4, Bell begins by suggesting that if humans ultimately fail, God ultimately fails. If humans fail, then God is not ultimately great. From the passages in both the Old and New Testaments that speak of all peoples and nations acknowledging God, Bell concludes that all people will be united and reconciled to God, and he strongly objects to the idea that God will pronounce judgment upon people so that they are separated from him forever. Especially, he objects to the idea that decisions of faith made in the present life have irrevocable consequences. With this as a preface, he then explores the concept of *apokatastasis*, the ancient theology advanced by Origen and a handful of others in church history that in the end all humankind will be saved. Bell does not cite Origen, but he surely has him in mind. He says that "at the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God" (p. 109). At the center? Really? It at least should be acknowledged (which Bell does not do) that this theory was condemned as heretical at the 5th Ecumenical Council in 553 AD. Nevertheless, Bell presses on. In describing the apocalyptic symbolism near the end of the Revelation of John, he urges that the vision of the holy city is a buoyant, hopeful and healing message about a new world where murder, destruction and deceit are eliminated (pp. 112-113). He underscores the statement that "the gates of the city will never be shut," and he takes this to mean that people are free to come and go, that is, God will continue to allow opportunities for reconciliation, even in the afterlife. (He chooses not to comment on the succeeding text in 22:15 that says "outside are dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.") Such texts only muddy the waters.

Bell asks many questions, but he offers few clear answers. Earlier, he seems to object to the evangelical notion that love is linked to freedom. Freedom to refuse God's love means that God does not get what he wants, and this in turn, compromises his sovereignty (p. 103). He seems to suggest that if large numbers of people refuse God, this somehow leaves God with a failed experiment. Later, however, he crosses over himself and argues that there is a better question than, "Does God get what he wants." It is the question, "Do we get what we want" (p. 116)? Here, he emphatically says "yes"—if we want hell, we will get it; if we want heaven, we will get it (pp. 116-117). Bell cannot ride

both horses at the same time. He cannot cast aspersions toward traditional evangelicalism, because it concludes that many people will freely refuse God's love, and then turn around and argue that the true nature of love is that it cannot be forced or coerced (p. 119).

On to Chapter 5. Here, Bell suggests that the death of Jesus on the cross was the answer to all the sacrificial traditions world-wide that were used by pagans to appease their deities. He argues that this is the burden of the Letter to the Hebrews (p. 124). Unfortunately for Bell's argument, the Letter to the Hebrews is simply not about the sacrifices of the pagan world and their attempt to please their gods. It is about a sacrificial system that was ordained by Yahweh for his ancient people, a system for the atonement of sin, and this system culminated in the death of Jesus Christ, who was both the final great High Priest and the final sacrifice of Yom Kippur. In this chapter, we get much closer to the underpinnings of Bell's basic theology. The deeper issue, as I see it, is not so much Bell's speculations about heaven or hell, but about his understanding of the cross. The death of Jesus in the Letter to the Hebrews was emphatically NOT an answer to pagan religious demands! It was the appropriate and legitimate sacrifice of God's Son for human sin analogous to the Day of Atonement, when Israel's high priest offered blood on the altar for the sins of the nation. Though he admits it, Bell seems uncomfortable with the cross as atonement. At least, he does not want to allow atonement to be the controlling metaphor for explaining Jesus' death. He recognizes various metaphors for the meaning of Jesus' death (p. 128), but insists that the dominant one for the first millennium of Christian history was not atoning sacrifice, but *Christus Victor*, that is, Jesus' conquest of death (p. 128). Thereby he suggests that the traditional evangelical understanding of the cross as atonement is inadequate and misdirected. Such a historical conclusion is at least debatable, since the classic view of the cross as an atoning sacrifice is especially prominent in various patristic theologians like Irenaeus, Athanasius and others. Be that as it may, Bell urges that the ultimate meaning of the death of Jesus was that it was a pathway to life, an event "as wide as the world, extending to all creation" (p. 132). Bell is certainly right to assert the link between the cross and the resurrection—that the one without the other is incomplete—but the diminishing of the cross as atonement is certainly problematic. It is not surprising that given this approach to the cross the traditional hymnody of the church is quickly being displaced by contemporary praise choruses in emergent churches, since traditional hymnody holds an exceedingly high view of the cross as an atoning sacrifice.

Bell begins Chapter 6 admirably with a pithy description of the mystery of Christ as the *Logos*. So far so good! He then goes on to urge that Jesus cannot be co-opted by Christianity, as though Christians had some private entitlement to Jesus. I would agree. However, when he says that while John remembers Jesus' claim to be the "way, truth and the life" and that "no one comes to the Father except through him," John did NOT say how or when or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Jesus (p. 154). In fact, Bell argues that Jesus does not even state that those coming to the Father through Jesus will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. Hmmm. St. John seems to be seriously at odds with Bell in this regard. He quotes Jesus as saying quite specifically, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (Jn. 6:29). John actually begins his gospel with the statement that to all who believed in Christ's name God gave the authority to become children of God (Jn. 1:12). Near the end

of his gospel, he says that the records in his gospel were written precisely so that his readers might “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31). Indeed, the word “believe” is found more times in the Gospel of John than any other book in the Bible—this gospel by the same John who remembered Jesus saying, “I am the way, truth and life, and no one comes to God except through me.” This is hardly the stuff of unknowing! Bell seems to reject exclusivity (no one is saved but believers) as well as inclusivity (everyone is saved regardless of their religious pathway). Instead, he opts for what he calls “exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity” (insisting Jesus is the way, but embracing the idea that his saving love will include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum who may or may not know that they are saved by Christ (p. 155). So, what does such verbiage actually mean? Bell is not very forthcoming at this point. He wants to retain baptism and Eucharist as signs, but not as signs solely for Christian believers. Rather, he says they are signs uniting everybody in the world—all people in all places at all times. He seems to use the metaphor of the rock (Moses struck the rock, but he did not know it was Christ) to represent the full range of humans and their multi-faceted encounters with God—even without knowing what or who it was (p. 158). So, he says, “Sometimes people use his name; other times they don’t,” which I suppose means that it is unnecessary to know anything particular about Christ in order to be redeemed by Christ. In short, it is saying that we may be saved by “grace alone,” but we definitely are not saved by “faith alone,” at least not faith that is cognitive or has any particular content about Jesus.

After recounting Jesus’ parable of the two sons at the beginning of Chapter 7, Bell does an adequate job of relating it to the larger framework of Christ’s mission and God’s love. He then charges that if people reject God and are consigned to hell forever, it would result in a final contradiction in God’s essential character: he would change from being a loving Father who invites the prodigal home to “a cruel tormentor who would ensure there was no escape from endless agony” (pp. 173-174). In this caricature, he suggests that if this were so, something is fundamentally wrong with God. Yet, does this not put the onus on God to measure up to what we think he should be rather than the other way around? For one thing, Bell has little or no time for discussions about nuances of understanding the afterlife. Repeatedly, he presents his images as stark contrasts: God is either loving or cruel, the afterlife is either a place of remedial education or blister-popping fire. There are no in-betweens. Yet for centuries Christians have discussed at length various sorts of in-betweens.² Bell seems to say that if one cannot accept the most radical view on the right, he must accept the most radical view on the left, and this, surely, is a false dilemma. To depict anyone who sees it differently as worshipping a God for whom we should call the authorities or child protection services is cheap rhetoric (p. 174).

In this connection, there is one subject that is largely if not entirely absent in Bell’s work. It is the biblical subject of God’s wrath. I would agree that some Christians

² The Evangelical Alliance, a British association of evangelical churches, for instance, describes four distinct positions: 1) eternal conscious physical and spiritual torment (the biblical imagery of eternal fire is literal), 2) eternal conscious spiritual torment (the biblical imagery of eternal fire is metaphorical), 3) eternal separation from God (hell is the loss of relationship with the divine), and 4) conditional immortality and/or annihilationism (humans are not inherently immortal; rather, they are only granted immortality when they are saved), cf. R. Peterson, “Undying Worm Unquenchable Fire,” *Christianity Today* (Oct 23, 2000), pp. 30-37. My point here is not to evaluate these positions but merely to point out that they exist.

have used the passages about divine wrath in ways that are traumatizing. I am not defending such usage. At the same time, to sweep away this side of God's holy character as though it did not exist or was mutually exclusive to God's character of love is surely a lopsided and unsupported theology. Even St. Paul urges his readers, "Consider the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness toward you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off" (Ro. 11:22). Nor is divine wrath exclusively an Old Testament subject (which sometimes people incorrectly suggest). God's holy anger against sin is revealed from heaven in the present against all godlessness and wickedness (Ro. 1:18), and it will further be revealed in what Paul calls the "day of wrath" in the last judgment (Ro. 2:5). When Paul envisions this day of judgment, he does not envision it as remedial—the day when sinners will be given a reprieve to try again—but as the day when God will give to each person according to what he has done. For those who have persisted in following evil and rejecting the truth, it will be divine wrath and anger (Ro. 2:8; cf. Ep. 5:6; Col. 3:6).

Regardless of whether or not Bell is correct about post-mortem chances for salvation, the concepts of divine love and divine wrath are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is precisely those who have been justified by Christ's blood who will be saved from this wrath (Ro. 5:9; 1 Th. 1:10; 5:9). Further, the images of the Lamb in the Revelation of John show not merely the tender and merciful side of Christ, though these images are surely there, too, but they also include the "wrath of the Lamb" (Rv. 6:16). Bell's caricature of God is childish, like an adolescent who rages against his parents because they discipline him and accuses them of not loving him. This is simply not the case—not for earthly parents, and not for God. Perhaps C. S. Lewis said it in language even a post-modern might understand, when Susan asks about Aslan, the lion, "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe. 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good! He's the king, I tell you" For Bell, the only punishment of wrong choices is the suffering the wrong choices themselves may bring. This, for Bell, is hell. Such a viewpoint, to put it bluntly, is not a biblical view of punishment. Retribution also includes something God does, not merely something we do to ourselves. His love is not merely permissive love; it is also holy love, and to suggest otherwise is to stray far from the biblical descriptions of God. So, when Bell says that "we do not need to be rescued from God" (p. 182), he is decidedly on the other side of the fence from St. Paul, who says exactly that this the case: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him" (Ro. 5:9)!

Repeatedly, Bell casts aspersions towards the people he loves to hate—fundamental Christians who talk about heaven and hell in any traditional way and are unable to throw good parties (p. 179), missionaries and pastors' families who have "the toxic notion that God is a slave driver," leaders who are "washed up, fried" and never take a vacation (p. 180), people who preach the "gospel of goats" (he must have liked that phrase, since he used it twice, p. 180-181).

Finally in the last pages of Chapter 9, Bell seems to sense no need in his theological system for repentance. According to Bell, the "deepest, darkest sins and your

shameful secrets are simply irrelevant when it comes to the counterintuitive ecstatic announcement of the gospel” (p. 187). Really? All it takes is announcement? He seems to say that forgiveness is offered and obtained without repentance. Exit John the Baptist! John must have had it all wrong! It also makes Jesus into a schizophrenic Christ, since Jesus actually did talk about the important of repentance (Mt. 4:17; 11:20-21; 12:41; Lk. 10:13; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10). The disciples who were sent into Galilee were surely on the wrong track as well (Mk. 6:12)! The apostles who preached in Jerusalem and elsewhere messed it up big time (Ac. 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20)! By singling out some passages and blocking out others, Bell succeeds in building a plausible structure for anyone who has never read the Bible, but they are the very people least likely not to discern what he is doing. Bell’s approach to theology is a lot like the Jefferson Bible: cut and paste what you like and discard the rest.

By the time I reached Chapter 10, the final chapter, I had decided that Rob Bell probably had strung together several sermons and made them into a book. The choppy dialogue seems most apropos for verbal communication, not written, measured discourse. (But perhaps that’s the best way to get post-moderns to read something these days.) Whether or not this impression is correct, I found Bell’s account of his own conversion compelling (pp. 193-194). Many will identify with it, not the least of which is me, for I, too, remember kneeling with my mother at home and putting my trust in Christ when I was a child. As Bell said, “It did something to me. Something *in* me,” and later, “What happened that night was real.” It was real for me, too. I have no objection to Bell’s description of the invitation—Jesus’ invitation to embrace a love we fear is too good to be true and finding that it is actually good enough to be true. I wish I had said that in that way! I am less impressed with his treatment of the parables of the ten virgins and the tares and wheat (pp. 196-197). He wants to say that these shocking images are primarily about missing out on rewards and celebrations. They certainly are that—no doubt about it—but surely the words, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment,” and “tie them in bundles to be burned” suggests infinitely more than simply missing out on the party. Still, Bell ends on a right note: “Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came.”

Now, back to my original thoughts about the growing distance between traditional and progressive evangelicalism. My overall impression is that the emergent crowd, and perhaps to a lesser degree the seeker-sensitive crowd, are trying to do theologically what they did twenty years ago with worship style. Traditional worship was out, while contemporary worship was in. Now, a couple decades later, traditional theology is out while new trends are in. If contemporary worship was designed for people who didn’t like church, emergent theology is designed for people who don’t like orthodoxy. The trajectories of northern Israel and southern Judah will likely continue to drift apart, though each will retain some influence on the other, because they are both “Israel” in some sense. It remains to be seen whether Athaliah from the north will indelibly compromise the Davidic family in the south. I hope not, but only time will tell.