

Sermon: Rob Bell and the Harrowing of Hell

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Text: 1 Peter 3: 18-20

By Mat Taylor

Rob Bell, a popular evangelical mega-church preacher, recently created quite a stir in the religion world by taking on one of Christianity's oldest sacred cows—eternal damnation. Asking some difficult and probing questions, Bell makes it clear to his readers that he's uncomfortable with the idea that large swathes of the human race will find themselves nothing but fodder for divine justice. Bell asks how one can reconcile the belief in a just and good God with the claim that the vast majority of the earth's population will be condemned to wither in torture for all eternity for sins committed in the short, finite span of life here on this broken, imbalanced, and scary world. It's a good question.

To be clear, Bell doesn't exactly answer that question. He presents a whole range of biblically oriented views and interpretations, including the idea of universal reconciliation, but he never describes himself as a universalist, per se. He doesn't try to convince his readers to become universalists, either, but nor does he dissuade them. Instead of easy answers to all these difficult questions, he suggests instead that we live in the tension between God's warnings and God's promises.

Bell is careful to keep that tension always in view. Though the name of the book is "LOVE WINS," he in no way discards the reality of divine judgment.

Simply put, there are certain things that just don't belong in the kingdom of God: violence, rape, oppression, domination, racism, cruelty—just to name a few. There are plenty of human behaviors that God judges to be unacceptable.

When we pray the Lord's prayer that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven—we are praying for justice—because there can be no peace without it. My good friend and pastor, Su McLain, recently quoted Martin Luther on her Facebook page:

Peace is more important than all justice; and peace was not made for the sake of justice, but justice for the sake of peace.—

Amen! God's justice exists for the sake of peace. I would even go a step further and say that God's justice always works in concert with God's mercy. The one is an extension of the other. Justice and mercy are but two sides of the same coin.

I believe that's the same point the Bell wants to make in his book. Whatever happens in the fullness of eternity—God's future for every person will be BOTH merciful and just. We don't know exactly what that will look like in the Kingdom to come, and pretending we do is just silly

and maybe even harmful to the Gospel of a loving God!

All in all, there's nothing too controversial about the book—certainly nothing any honest person hasn't wondered about. Nevertheless, Bell has been excoriated by a good number of evangelical divines. From popular evangelical scholars like John Piper to a number of conservative seminary Presidents, Bell has been accused of pernicious heresy—which makes one wonder if they consider Rob Bell to be in grave danger of being damned to the hell they are so happy to defend.

Ironically, if the same book had been written by a Barbra Brown Taylor or a Will Willowman or a Eugene Peterson, chances are there would have hardly been a ripple in the world of religion, other than the fact that the book seems rather poorly written. After all, mainline folks have wrestled with such theological tensions for a long, long time, and most evangelicals already consider the lot of us to be heretics, anyway. The problem was that one of their own seemed to be whittling down the impact and horror of hell.

Oddly enough, it's clear that plenty of early Christians are guilty of the same thing. For example, the apostle Paul never, to the best of my knowledge, mentions hell. He mentions God's wrath and judgment, but instead of hell, he speaks of death. "The wages of sin is death," he warns us in his letter to the Romans.

Ancient Christians even claimed that Jesus was guilty of harrowing the dominion of Satan and his minions. In our passage this morning, the author of 1st Peter writes that:

He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah....

Apparently, sometime around the close of the first century and the beginning of the second, some Christians were claiming that Jesus, during his sojourn into the death, entered into to hell (or hades) for the purpose of rescuing and saving the souls of those imprisoned there since the antediluvian period.

As the centuries passed, that claim grew into something greater: A full-scale invasion of hell, with Jesus busting down the gates of Hades, binding the devil, and rescuing the righteous saints who were captive there.

It was a way of claiming that Jesus, the crucified savior, was not merely the victim of sin and death, but was in fact, the Victor over sin and death once and for all.

These beliefs had a profound impact on ancient Christianity, and the claim in the Apostle's Creed that Jesus "descended into hell" was certainly formed by these ancient images of a Christ whose spirit descended into the deepest depth as part of a God's great redemptive work.

Now I know that a great many folks don't like those little words in the Creed, that business about Jesus descending into hell. In fact, in most contemporary and updated versions of the creed,

those words are either altogether deleted or translated into something more palatable, like he descended into the grave or death.

I'm not sure exactly why those words are so offensive. Some don't like them because they seem unbiblical, and granted, there is thin biblical support for them, but as you can see in our passage today, those little words are not wholly without support.

Perhaps some feel that it's just too scandalous. If Christ is absolute purity, holiness, and innocence how could his spirit, even briefly, be subjected to a place that is fit only for abject sin, depravity, and evil?

However, isn't this the very scandal of the cross! Is not the cross the symbol of being cursed and cut off from God? Paul writes that "God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

Some object because it just seems too silly, a little too hokey—the idea of Jesus charging the gates of hell, raiding the dominion of the devil. If we take this literally, it's just too much for some folks. It's just too much for our imagination to handle.

And, maybe it is a little too much for the imagination. In our modern age, we're not interested in imagination; we're interested in fact. The question we want to ask is: did this story really happen? Asking such a question is important, I'll concede that. But, another and maybe better question we could ask is: what does this story mean?

What does it mean to claim that Christ's own spirit went to redeem the spirits of those languishing in the earth since the antediluvian period in the days of violence when the nephilim ruled the earth before the great flood of Noah? Why tell such a story? What does it mean that ancient Christians believed such a thing?

Perhaps it means that God's love and justice cannot be constrained by boundaries, nor impeded by any power or principality—not even that of the Satan. Perhaps it is a way of claiming God to be bigger, more surprising, more all-encompassing than we could ever imagine. Perhaps, it is story that matches the poetry of the 139th Psalm:

- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
- ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Ultimately, God's JUSTICE and God's MERCY are inescapable, we cannot finally escape God's justice, not even in the highest heaven, nor can we finally escape God's mercy even in the deepest hell—but for all humanity God's will will be both merciful and just. As such, we should have good hope for all people, even as we take very seriously God's justice, not excluding

ourselves from the reach of God's wrath.

Ultimately, we live between the warnings and the promises—and here we must live in the tension between these warnings and these promises.

These are the very words of the Presbyterian *Declaration of Faith* written by the Southern PCUS in 1977. I'd be content replace our entire book of confessions with that one document.

In the declaration of Faith we are challenged to live in tension. I know of no other confession that gives such humble, practical, and biblical advice. Live in the tension; don't try to figure it all out. The bible, after all, is a story, not a theological treatise.

I'm not comfortable with Arminianism, Calvinism, or universalism—all of these ISMS are a little too neat and tidy. All of these systems try to resolve the tension, either by minimizing God's justice, or by bifurcating justice and mercy so that one person receives all mercy and another all justice.

I think the best theology is to live in the tension and dialog between these things. That's certainly what Rob Bell seems to be proposing—that we live in the tension.

Maybe the best theology isn't a theology at all—at least not a systematic one, but a way of living and being. Instead of the right system, we should be much more concerned about having the right practice, for the right reason, for the right Truth.

The truth is Jesus Christ, the reason is to enter into the Kingdom he has inaugurated NOW, and the right practice is to live according to his love, mercy, grace, and peace. To be in union with Jesus and his Kingdom is to know heaven, and to set one's self against the kingdom is to be in hell.

That's my theology—anything more is well beyond my pay grade. It is after all, God alone who determines the shape of eternity.

For the record, I do believe in Heaven and I do believe in Hell. I believe that both exist and both represent realities that exist here and now as well as in the hereafter. I believe it is our job to help keep people out of hell here on this earth, and God's job to keep them out of hell in the hereafter.

And we desperately need to be hard at work on our end of things. We are after all, the Body of Christ here on earth, and it's our job to storm the gates of hell in this world and on this side of the grave. It's our job to pave the way for God's kingdom to be realized here on earth, as it is in heaven. Let us be about our job with conviction and faithfulness, and let us leave the shape of eternal things in the hands of our Almighty Father.

Thankfully, I trust God will do his job much more effectively than we'll do ours! Don't you?

Mat