

Eternity: Reasons for Hope

Mt Hawthorn Community Church, 9 Oct 2011

- Rob Bell is an American pastor and writer most famous for his Nooma videos. Over the last six years, he's been encouraging a more generous, life-giving faith among evangelicals. Earlier this year, he stepped over a boundary line that got him in lots of trouble.
 - His publisher, Zondervan, would not publish his new book, *Love Wins* and he went to a non-evangelical publisher. Just before the book's release, John Piper, a Calvinist pastor at the other end of the evangelical spectrum, tweeted 'Goodbye, Rob Bell'. He was farewelling Rob from the evangelical fold. The book came out and has generated more discussion about hell than has been heard in memory.
- In *Love Wins*, Bell writes:
 - 'A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.' (4)
- He goes on to ask:
 - 'Is history tragic? Have billions of people been created only to spend eternity in conscious punishment and torment, suffering infinitely for the finite sins they committed in the few years they spent on earth?' (52)
- Even more conservative evangelicals share Bell's questions. John Stott writes:
 - 'emotionally I find the concept [of hell torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be - and is - not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?' (Edwards with Stott, 1988: 314-315)
- When I was a child, a group of evangelists came to Collie and put on a play in the school hall. The play was about judgement day, and the fate of a man who thought he'd lived a good life, only to find that because he hadn't given his life over to Jesus, he couldn't join God in heaven.

So far so familiar. The man walks slowly away to his fate only to be told by an angel to remember that there is always hope, even now.

- I was both thrilled and outraged by such an idea. I said to my dad in the car on the way home that surely they had got that part wrong. Were they crazy? There was no hope for those who didn't accept Jesus in this life!
- This morning, I want to give some reasons for hope, some reasons for thinking that hell might not be the last word for people who have rejected God.
 - The five reasons for hope that I want to give point in the direction that hell may serve a redemptive purpose, that it might be an opportunity to repent and so it may not go on forever.

1. The pictures of hell in the Bible are not straightforward

- You look for vain for hell in the OT.
 - The Psalmists talk about *Sheol*, a place where all the dead go, a place of shadowy existence
 - Hell is a doctrine that seems to have developed between the end of the Old Testament and the time of the New Testament.
- But most of the references to hell come from the mouth of Jesus himself.
 - So hell is not something we can claim is marginal in the Bible. It's hard to know what to make of Jesus' references to hell. He wasn't concerned to give us information about it, but to warn us about it.
 - He talked about the nature of hell in the same way that others Jews of his time talked about it. Were the details of their knowledge divinely inspired? Or was that not the point?
 - Rob Bell has some interesting words to say about the way Jesus talks about hell.
 - "In reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word "hell," what is so striking is that people believing the right or wrong things isn't his point. He's often not talking about "beliefs" as we think about them - he's talking about anger and lust and indifference. He's talking about the state of his listeners' hearts, about how they conduct themselves, how they interact with their neighbours, about the kind of effect they have on the world. Jesus did not use hell to try and compel "heathens" and "pagans" to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love." (44)

- If this is true and Jesus was walking amongst us today, the people he would be warning about hell are not the people outside the church, but the people doing things in his name.

2. Does God get what God wants?

- In 1 Timothy 2:3 we read ‘This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.’
- A verse like this causes many theologians problems.
 - *Strict Calvinists* will say that it doesn’t quite mean what it says:
 - God does not want to save everyone, because God has predestined some to salvation and some to damnation. This verse means that God perhaps wants all *types* of people saved.
 - Calvinists believe that everything God wants, God will get. And since we know elsewhere in the Bible that some people are going to hell, God obviously doesn’t want all people to be saved.
 - *Arminians* will say that God really *does* want everyone to be saved, but that God doesn’t always get what God wants because God has given agency to humans.
 - God wants to be in relationship with people, a relationship freely chosen, not forced on them. So God may want everyone to be saved, but God will not get what God wants, because of human free will.
 - But are Arminians idolizing free will?
 - Do they think free will is so valuable that God would accept any unredeemable horror rather than override it on any occasion?
 - That’s how we treat our own children – we are ready to step in and intervene, prevent them from making terrible choices.
 - Any reasonable person who actually tasted separation from God in hell would choose again. Indeed, I think that if people on Earth genuinely believed that hell waited for them after death, they would choose to accept God’s offer of salvation. I suspect most people don’t reject Christianity wilfully, but because their experience of it leaves them unconvinced of its truth. Any person who does wilfully choose hell is so twisted and irrational that their ‘freedom’ to choose is hardly true freedom.
- One of the problems the interpretations of this verse show is that many Christians expect the Bible to be a simple book, entirely consistent from Genesis to Revelation.

- To me, it seems more plausible to say there is a conversation going on in the library of books we call the Bible.
- There is tension between ideas and between thinkers.
- There is a tension, for example, between a strand of thinking that in the end all will be well, God will reconcile everything through Christ – a tension between that and the punishment or exile of those who have rejected God and don't want to be a part of the new kingdom.

3. Does the nature of God change suddenly when we die?

- '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.' (52)
- 'Is God like the characters in a story Jesus would tell, old ladies who keep searching for the lost coin until they find it, shepherds who don't rest until that one sheep is back in the fold, fathers who rush out to greet and embrace their returning son, or, in the end, will God give up?' (53)
- What if the parables Jesus told give us the clearest picture of what God is like? What if God's persistence endures into the afterlife?

4. Can the new heavens and new earth hold a torture chamber?

- The Bible looks forward again and again till a time when everything will be set right and the world will acknowledge God as Creator and King. Every tear will be wiped away, the lion will lie down with the lamb and there will be no more evil or rebellion against God.
- How then can hell go on existing in this picture? How can there be people still in rebellion against God, not reconciled to God or to other humans? Doesn't ongoing suffering mean that God's work of redemption is not finished? This picture of hell contradicts the idea that God's victory over evil will be complete.

5. 'Her gates will never shut'

- Revelation is full of disturbing images of death and judgement. In Revelation 20, those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. In the next chapter, the new Jerusalem descends and we read 'on no day will its gates ever be shut... The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.'
 - A universalist reading of Revelation starts by saying that surely outside the gates of the city is the lake of fire. And the nations who have opposed the saints right through Revelation are the ones whose names are in that lake. Yet the nations

are also the ones who are entering the open gates to take their place in the new Jerusalem and in the forgiveness and love of God.

- Gregory MacDonald says it like this: ‘... the open doors are not just a symbol of security but primarily a symbol of the God who excludes no one from his presence forever. Not only do the gates offer the opportunity for the lost to enter salvation from the lake of fire, but in John’s vision the lost actually avail themselves of this opportunity.’ (115)
- Rob Bell says: ‘Can God bring proper, lasting justice, banishing certain actions - and the people who do them - from the new creation while at the same time allowing and waiting and hoping for the possibility of the reconciliation of those very same people? Keeping the gates, in essence, open?’ (60)

- **Conclusion**

- Paradoxically I hope that I haven’t completely convinced you. I can’t dogmatically hold out hope for universal reconciliation. It is one hope or possibility in the Bible, one voice in a conversation with louder voices.
- Universal hope, or a belief in second chances, is often seen as a terribly dangerous idea.
 - If you wish to buy Rob Bell’s *Love Wins* from Koorong, you have to ask for it, because they keep it under the counter. Word Books website has a disclaimer saying they do not endorse the book.
 - If you want the other side of the debate, there are already four books published in response – including *God Wins* and *Erasing Hell*.
- Here are some comments on Amazon on a review of *The Evangelical Universalist*:
 - “Jim Cateno says: Biblical Universalism is a questionable doctrine. If I, holding a more traditional view, am wrong-then no harm is done-all are saved in the end. But if Gregory is wrong and just one soul does not repent because he was told that he will be saved in the end-then an eternal harm was done. There simply is no upside to preaching universalism.”
 - “Caroline Wong says:If you are wrong, you'd have a) needlessly tormented people who have lost loved ones b) turned off thousands from Christianity c) made God out to be who He is not d) got the Good News wrong. If Gregory MacDonald is wrong, not one extra person would be in hell because God decides who goes where, does He not?”
- If universal hope makes us complacent, makes us forget that God is holy, and wants us to live the right way, then it is a bad thing. But if it comforts us, and restores our hope that God is loving and merciful, then it is a good thing.

- If you imagine God as being very easygoing, not caring about sin, then you need to find the strand of the Bible that talks of God's hatred of sin, and God's judgement on humankind. But if you've gone too far the other way, and you fear God is harsh and merciless, you need to hear that strand of the Bible which dares to hope that God will set all things right, reconciling all of creation through Jesus Christ. You need to hear that and be comforted.