Honey I'm Tempted: A Review of Andy Grammer's "Honey, I'm Good."

You might have heard rising musical artist Andy Grammer's new song called "Honey, I'm Good."{1} The song's catchy and upbeat music and positive message might have caused you to dance a little in the car. Among many popular songs today, I think Christians do have a reason to be encouraged about this song and its message. Grammer explicitly portrays the theme of faithfulness in relationship through the closing line, "I will stay true." This song does offer hope of self-control and faithfulness in a culture that seems to value those virtues less and less. However, the Scripture offers much more insight about faithfulness and fleeing temptation.

Fidelity and Self-Control

The lyrics reflect the truth that God meant romantic relationships to be exclusive. The song's writer, Nolan Sipe, captures the parameters of love: "My baby's already got all of my love." Although the woman may not be his wife, the connection seems natural to God's mandate for marriage as exclusively between one husband and one wife. In that way He made it beautiful and pure.

Jesus, the Apostle Paul, and even John in Revelation all invoke marriage as a picture of Christ as the husband and the Church as His bride. So the special love and acts accompanying marriage should not be shared outside the relationship, just as our love and worship of Christ should not be offered to any idols. Sexual immorality and affairs are so offensive because they rob the spouse of love saved for them alone, thus destroying what God intended for marriage and victimizing the spouse. So when a song calls for fidelity in romantic

relationships, that is something Christ-followers can get behind.

“Honey, I’m Good.” engages with idea of temptation by describing a situation in which a man is fleeing the very real and near pull to be unfaithful. Without much detail, the song narrates the fight to turn down the apparent advances of a physically attractive woman. Sipe accurately conveys the tragedy of falling into lustful temptation by writing the lyrics, “Now better men than me have failed, drinking from that unholy grail.”

Although the song does demonstrate the power and danger of sexual lust, the Bible offers more wisdom on just how dangerous lust really is to faithfulness. As Christians we should continually look to Scripture for further insight and grounding because, although the writer gets it right, there’s no basis for this ethic other than loyalty felt in the moment—something that could quickly and easily change. God understands our temptation and warns against entertaining lustful desires in Matthew 5:28 by equating such fixation on forbidden fulfillment with the act of adultery.

Lust is not only dangerous because it is so offensive to God but also because it is powerful. Peter claims that lust wages war against our souls in 1 Peter 2. Additionally, lustful desires can and often are accompanied by lies that tell us our sexual immorality will make our lives better and will be consequence-free. Through prayer and meditation in Scripture we are equipped to fight lustful desires and lies. By the power of God’s Spirit within us, we can win over what the Bible refers to as our flesh. Before Paul calls the Colossians to “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality…,” he entreats the believers he cares so deeply about to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” because “you have been raised with Christ.”{2}

The Lie of Temptation

Andy Grammer sings in the chorus “I’m good, I could have another but I probably should not. I got somebody at home, and if I stay I might not leave alone.” Recognizing the temptation is laudable, but there is danger in thinking along the lines of “I could probably have another.” As Christ-followers, I think we often put too much faith in our ability to resist temptation and are not wise about actively fleeing temptation like God repeatedly calls us to do in Scripture. It may be true that we “could probably have another” whatever or whoever “another” may be, but we ought to default to fleeing.

Furthermore, we often tell ourselves when we are struggling with a sin or temptation that we can conquer this sin or flee this temptation alone. But sometimes it is not as easy as refusing another drink at the bar. Often temptation sneaks up on us when our guard is down. This is why God gave us our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We need the accountability of God’s Word and our Christian community—because most of the time we cannot fight the battle alone, something the song does not touch on.

Don’t Just Reject, Abstain!

Despite Sipe’s lyrics at the beginning of the chorus, the end of the chorus concludes with fleeing temptation when he writes, “No, honey, I’m good, I could have another but I probably should not, I gotta bid you adieu.” As a Christian, I am glad to see this insight reflecting the Bible’s command.

However, as we think about this song as Christians we should hold ourselves to the higher standard Christ has given us. We should not only flee temptation like the song suggests, but we should actively avoid situations where temptations arise. When I first heard this song on the radio I was surprised at the message but I could not help but wonder why that man was in this position to begin with. My first thought was, “Don’t go

to the bar or club if there are women there who want to seduce you!”

Whenever it is possible to avoid temptation, we are required to do so. Matthew beautifully encourages us how to deal with temptation when he quotes Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”{3} With that being said, sometimes it is not possible to avoid situations where compromise could arise. For example, if you are a man it may not be practical or even loving to avoid all women all the time as a measure against adultery. However, you should equip yourself mentally and spiritually and have backup from a fellow believer (a “spiritual wingman”) for unavoidable tempting environments.

Overall, I think we can dance and be thankful for the Christian morals that can be gleaned from Andy Grammer’s song “Honey, I’m Good.” I also hope that if we hear that song on the radio we will be reminded of the insight and commands that God gives us to flee temptation.
Mostly importantly, we need to remember that when it comes to temptation, we ultimately have the strength to fight it by the power of the Holy Spirit working through us and through Christian encouragement and accountability. And if we fall into temptation we also need to meditate on the promises of the gospel. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, God gives us full forgiveness even though consequences may still remain.

Notes

1. Warning: The music video shows homosexual couples and has mild language. I do not address either in this article but am instead focusing on the overall message of the song.

2. Colossians 3:1-5, All Bible Verses are in the English Standard Version

3. Matthew 26:41

©2015 Probe Ministries

Don’t Take Me to Church Without the Gospel: A Review of Hozier’s “Take Me to Church”

What started as a music video on YouTube as a statement against the abuse of the homosexual community peaked as the second most popular song according to Billboard Top 100 in early 2015. With its powerful music and damning words towards the Church, I was compelled to research and find the meaning and implications of Hozier’s song “Take Me to Church.” In the song, Hozier captures the sacrifice of religion without the truth and hope of the gospel.

The chorus, especially, paints a rather bleak picture of the seemingly pointless sacrifice of religion. In it Hozier writes,

“I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I’ll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
Offer me that deathless death
Good god, let me give you my life.”
Through the song, Hozier rightly grasps the element of sacrifice required of faith. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include parallel passages that call Christians to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus.

Christians' Meaningful Sacrifice

Sam Allberry, author of *Is God Anti-Gay?* and associate pastor at St Mary's Church in Maidenhead, UK, spoke at Covenant College recently about Christianity and homosexuality as someone who struggles with same-sex attraction himself. He expounded upon this idea of the sacrifice of Christians when he told the story of someone with a same-sex partner who asked him, "What could possibly be worth leaving my partner for?"

This question of sacrifice is essential for everyone faced with the gospel to ask. There is a cost; you will have to deny yourself, whether it's the issue of same-sex sexual practices, alcohol abuse, pride, or even just laziness.

If the message of the Bible stopped there, we would be left with the hopeless and purposeless sacrifice that the song portrays. However, the Bible does not start or end with our sacrifice. Romans 5 points Christians to Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us by proclaiming that ". . . God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Those who trust in Christ will never have to pay the price of our own sins because Christ did it once and for all on the cross while we were still in sin. We can entrust Him with our lives because He first gave His perfect life for us. Even though we are steeped in sin as Hozier points out through the lyrics "We were sick but I love it," Christ does not leave us in our sickness. In fact, He heals us, showing us hope in something much greater than our sins.

Allberry concluded that the answer to the question presented to him had to be: the gospel—only the gospel is worth leaving everything for. The gospel is truly *the* good news for everyone, because through His sacrifice the lyric rings true, "only then I am clean."

So our sacrifice is meaningful in Christ not because our sacrificing saves us but because it is a response of the

saving grace Christians have already received. Christians can give up our old way of life because Christ has given us new life. In Ephesians 4, we are called to this painful process of "putting off our old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

How Should We Respond?

It is legitimate to wonder what we as Christians should do with songs and a culture that seem to attack or misrepresent the Church. I do not think we should respond to such songs by posting combative comments online or by changing the radio station every time the song plays. Rather, we should appreciate the song for its musicality and learn from its lyrics. I see two main takeaways:

First, I think we should reflect on what songs say about our culture's view of the Church and how we as the Church can respond to this marred image. In an interview by Gigwise, Hozier says that "It hasn't been a good year for the Church-it hasn't been a good hundred years for the Church." In some ways, I agree with Hozier that, especially on the topic of homosexuality, we have not loved those outside and inside the Church well. I mourn for those abused by the Church for their sexual sin as the song and music video illustrate. Sometimes the Church has fallen short of showing truth in love as commanded by Scripture. Instead the Church often fails to speak truth by accepting the sin of homosexuality or lovelessly alienating, and trying to legalistically "fix" the sin.

Second, the core of our religion as Christians must remain the gospel; without it the lyric would ring true: "Every Sunday's getting more bleak, a fresh poison each week." In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that as Christians, "We are of all

people the most to be pitied" if the gospel—the message of Christ's death and resurrection that reconciles us to God—is not true. I would challenge you, as I have been challenged, to continually ask yourself, "How does the gospel apply?" Wherever the gospel is missing so is truth, hope, and joy.

While I struggle with messages of hopelessness, I marvel in the promise that the gospel is true and there is hope for us who rest in the salvation of Christ both in this life and the next. I look forward to Heaven with my Lord and Savior, and yes, it is something worth leaving everything for.

©2015 Probe Ministries

"Culture in Conflict" Conference MP3s



Conference Recordings

Kerby Anderson:
Being Christian in a Post-Christian Society Truth Decay Basic Christian Evidences
Dr. Ray Bohlin:
The Privileged Planet and Intelligent Design Evidence for the Existence of God The Reliability of the Bible
Sue Bohlin:
Thinking Clearly About Sexual Confusion Helping Teens Understand Homosexuality Raising Gender-Secure Children
Ray and Sue:
Guys are From Mars, Girls Are From Venus

On Black Holes and Archangels

Dr.Terlizzese too often hears from Christian leaders and laymen that film, philosophy, literature, music, mythology, etc. (arts and humanities), are polluted wells that Christians do better to avoid rather than risk contamination. Yet no such warning is ever given about science and technology, always readily accepted under the rubric of natural revelation, except for some strange birds like Jacques Ellul or Neal Postman. "On Black Holes and Archangels" attempts to bridge this hypocritical divide in knowledge through raising art to the status of science as a legitimate source of knowledge concerning God and the human condition. As professor Lewis Sperry Chafer once wrote, theology uses "any and every source."

Reversal of Theological Priorities



When theology students talk about general revelation they mean science. God shows himself through the natural world; the movement of the stars, the rhythms of biology, the complexity of chemical synthesis, the beauty of the Grand Canyon and the like. Invariably, they almost always neglect human nature as a prominent theological source in acute reversal of theological priorities.

Comparatively, the bible says very little about the nature of the cosmos and the animal kingdom; instead it focuses on Adam's Race (humanity), Adam's prominence as divine vice-regent, his fall from innocence, the pain and suffering ensuing from a ruptured relationship with the Maker; the creation of the Hebrew people and the sacrificial offering of his Son (the Second Adam [Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:45]) in the plan of redemption.

The Bible is mostly about Israel's reluctance to serve God. Their obstinate disobedience, their refusal to recognize absolute righteousness of the One God, the pleading of the prophets to return to the Truth; their judgment and horrifying dissolution, but final salvation thanks only to the divine mercy of their heavenly Father, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). Israel serves as paradigm for all people, as the new creation of humanity in the Second Adam that brings the renewal of God's creation, the natural world; "A shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse . . . the lion shall lay down with the lamb . . . they will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-9; 27:6).

The theological reversal of priorities places science and reason over religion and faith, which interprets human nature in light of the cosmos rather than the cosmos in light of human nature and salvific transformation; as Adam goes so goes

nature; “Cursed is the ground because of you [Adam];” “the creation will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Genesis 3:17;
Romans 8:19-22).

This reversal is reminiscent of C. P. Snow’s critical paradigm called the *Two Cultures*.{1} Snow elucidated the theory that modern epistemology splits between science and the humanities, or said simply, between religion and science, between subjective and objective knowledge, creating an imbalance that favors one way of knowing over the other. Any juxtaposition in knowledge will result in the denigration of religion or science that fails to recognize their inherent compatibility.

Evangelicals are quick to latch onto the split in knowledge, recognizing science’s superiority as source of knowledge and engine for technological acceleration in a theological reversal of priorities that recognizes all things scientific and technological as gifts from God, even offering metaphysical justification for technological acceleration under the theological rubric of general revelation, yet disparaging the humanities as a polluted well. However, science is not general revelation, it is only the philosophical lens used to interpret it—which is not incorrect, just incomplete. A consistent application of general revelation must include the humanities as a valid source of knowledge on human nature as equal to science: philosophy, religion, literature, art, film, etc., all present a valid interpretation of human nature that serves as sources for theology. L. Sperry Chafer’s argued decades ago that theology uses “any and every source.”{2}

What is General Revelation?

Most evangelical theology divides revelation or God’s self-disclosure into two categories called general revelation and special revelation, a division of knowledge going back at

least to Saint Thomas Aquinas, receiving its greatest expression in the early modern period with the theory of the *Two Books* by Francis Bacon. The first book of the knowledge of God comes from the natural world, discerned and interpreted by reason, open to all—hence general knowledge; modern science and philosophy grounded in rationalism develops from this theological base. The second book of knowledge of God was considered Holy Scripture, discerned and interpreted through faith supported by reason—hence it is not open to all, only the faithful.

General revelation refers to the knowledge of God outside of the Bible in nature, history, and personal experience; it is open to all people and anyone can understand it. Special revelation refers to the knowledge of God revealed in the Bible alone, such as the dual nature of Christ as the God/Man, the Trinity, the story of redemption and the knowledge of salvation. It is special because only those who accept the word of God by faith know these truths discerned by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2). The two forms of revelation always complement each other. However, special revelation has greater authority than general revelation as the exclusive source for knowledge of salvation. We are saved through special revelation and never through general revelation which largely teaches humanity's need for God, but offers no solution because that will only be found in special revelation.

God's presence is revealed in nature but in a very limited way. Humanity actually knows very little about God from general revelation. People talk about "the love of God" but that is not a concept drawn from the natural world. The poet Tennyson said "nature is red in tooth and claw," meaning nature is cruel and unforgiving. The reality of nature as hostile and uncaring does not reflect the character of God. We know God is love, only because the Bible, not nature, tells us He is love (John 3:16; 1 John). Seeing a grizzly bear mother eating her young on a nature documentary convinced me of the

truth of Tennyson's statement.

General revelation means God reveals himself through the humanities as well as the sciences. The opening of the evangelical mind begins with a view of revelation that takes the arts and humanities as seriously as the sciences as a valid source of knowledge.

On Black Holes and Archangels

As the astronomer sees and reflects the divine glory of the cosmos, so the philosopher, musician, novelist and film artist reflects the inner light of soul—as complicated, profound and stunning as the swirl of galaxies, as explosive as a supernova and as deep and forbidding as a black hole! Artists explore remote and inhospitable depths of inner space. They transport the human spirit to destinies Magellan, Columbus and Verrazano never dreamt of; where Voyager will never encounter, where the telescope sees blindly . . . where angels fear to tread!

Art explores inner recesses of human nature and delivers subjective knowledge on topics such as anxiety, alienation, despair, boredom, hate, faith, love, fear, courage, lust, oppression and liberation, not quantifiable or objective, but just as real and valuable to Christian theology as the scientist's observations. Theologian of Culture Paul Tillich insightfully argued that art was the spiritual barometer of culture: "Art is religion."{3} In order to understand culture and the ultimate questions it asks in relating the Gospel message, the theologian must turn to philosophy, literature, paintings, music, etc.

Science and art are not in competition. Just as reason and faith complement each other as sources of knowledge, so subjective and objective knowledge act as two halves of the same coin—the union of the left and right sides of the brain. "Historian of Evil" Jeffrey Burton Russell writes,

> *This question of how we know seems unfamiliar because we have been brought up to imagine that something is either "real" or "not real," as if there were only one valid world view, only one way to look at things, only one approach to truth. Given the overwhelming prestige of natural science during the past century, we usually go on to assume that the only approach to truth is through natural science . . . it seems to be "common sense" . . . there are multiple truth systems, multiple approaches to reality. Science is one such approach. But . . . science is . . . a construct of the human mind . . . based on undemonstrable assumptions of faith. There is no scientific proof of the bases of science. [There is] no real difference between the subject and objective approach to things . . . science has its limits, and beyond those limits there are, like other galaxies, other truth systems. These other systems are not without resemblances to science, but their modes of thought are quite different: among them are history, myth, poetry, theology, art, and analytical psychology. Other truth systems have existed in the past; still more may exist in future; we can only guess what thought structures exist among other intelligent beings.*[{4}]

Only novelists, film makers, poets and theologians can communicate the possible thought structures of angels, demons or ETI's. How does the thought process of an archangel differ from that of seraphim and cherubim? The *Star Trek* franchise may be our best introduction to alien civilizations in the absence of any hard evidence.

Elysium: The Acceleration of the Status Quo into Outer Space

The recent (2013) science fiction movie *Elysium* depicts the human condition as it has existed throughout human history and extends it to the space station Elysium. In the year 2154, the class difference between the haves and the have not's appears

in bold relief. Elysium is a haven for the wealthy and technologically powerful elite who rule the sub-proletariat peoples of earth living in squalor, misery and deprivation. Los Angeles is reminiscent of the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo today. The few control the many through the accumulation and withholding of wealth and technological power, especially medical machines "Med-Bays" that reverse cell damage and heals all sickness and disease, granting virtual immortality. A self-appointed champion of the people Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) with nothing left to lose—since his exposure to a fatal radiation dose has left him with five days to live—mounts an assault on Elysium and accomplishes the impossible, a revolution that gains control of the space station's computer system and the robot guardians, turning them against the establishment and bringing relief to the people of Earth.

Elysium serves as a great cinematic example of liberation theology and window into the human condition that never changes despite technological acceleration that empowers the few to control the many. In any late stage of civilization, from Egypt and Rome to modernity, the same conditions prevail: the elite rule the many and technology makes no difference in alleviating social inequalities. Technological advance, as the movie portrays, only accelerates the status quo so that the struggle for freedom and equality of all people simply takes place off the earth on a space station.

The Enlightenment idea of progress envisions a global advance of humanity across all social lines. Any concentration of power and wealth in an elite group to the neglect of the rest of the planet, regardless of how technologically advanced or socially integrated, is not progress but regress. *Elysium* reflects contemporary global conditions—the status quo, the way things actually are, projecting them one generation or forty years into the future.

When technological acceleration grants the world equal social

conditions, such as the elimination of poverty, hunger and disease in Africa and Latin America as in the Western world, or the ready accessibility of health care in the United States as in the Netherlands or Canada, then we do justice to the noble word "*Progress*." In the absence of social equality, technological growth renders the same absolute social imbalances and universal disillusionment in the modern world as existed in the late Roman Empire, the concentration of power in an elite, ruling ruthlessly over the masses without hope of change, except on a global scale that moves rapidly towards dissolution, where robot guardians replace the Praetorian Guard.{5}

"Nein! Nein! Nein!"

There is no saving knowledge of God in history, science, economics, philosophy, math or whatever. NO! NO! NO! I am in complete agreement with Karl Barth on this point: "Nein! Nein! Nein!" No! Absolutely not! Never! The saving knowledge of Christ comes only through the word of God and centers on the work of Jesus Christ for all mankind. The knowledge of God in general revelation is not saving knowledge of the Gospel. If one could know God through the means of general revelation then it would make special revelation and the coming of Christ superfluous and useless. General revelation only condemns and functions for Gentiles like the Law of Moses for Jews (Romans 1:18-32; Galatians 3).

General revelation prepares humanity for special revelation. Knowledge of God and the human condition in general revelation creates the need for special revelation. General revelation shows humanity its sinfulness and need for a savior; "How majestic is Your name in all the earth. Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens . . . What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:1-4). Job gave the only possible answer as a finite being when reminded of wonders of God's creation: "I know You can do all things . . . I declared that

which I did not understand . . . I retract and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6). "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). General revelation demonstrates God's absence from humanity; it reveals the "UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23).

Special revelation meets that need for reconciliation with God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation cannot come from any other avenue than special revelation, a major theological premise the great theologian Karl Barth staunchly defended. According to Barth, all revelation is special revelation and all revelation imparts the saving knowledge of Christ.

General revelation brings the knowledge of God's absence, consciousness of alienation from the divine, much as the Mosaic Law brings the awareness of sin (Romans 1-3); but only to set us up for the knowledge of the Savior that comes from hearing the gospel of Christ preached (Romans 4-10). "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).{6}

Notes

1. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

2. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. One* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 5. Chafer defined systematic theology as "A science which follows a humanly devised scheme or order of doctrinal development and which purports to incorporate into its system all truth about God and His universe from any and every source."

3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7.

4. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 18,

19.

5. Carroll Quigley, *The Evolution of Civilizations: An Introduction to Historical Analysis* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979); Roderick Seidenberg, *Posthistoric Man: An Inquiry* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1950); Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1987, 1949); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR; Cascade, 2005).

6. Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace* by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply *No!* by Dr. Karl Barth (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002, Reprint).

©2014 Probe Ministries

Prometheus, God and Film: 10 Science Fiction Movies with a Theological Theme

Dr. Terlizzese looks to see if we can find a Christian worldview perspective or, at least, questions which need theological answers in a number of popular science fiction movies. He finds some good themes and bad themes and offers advice on how to view movies of all types.

Sci-fi films have never been more popular than they are today. Witness this summer's offerings: *Prometheus* (see below), *Chronicle*, *The Hunger Games* even the comic book–inspired *Avengers* and the romantic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* feature elements of science fiction. And like

most arts and literature, they contain elements of theology. This genre borrows a basic aspect of the Christian worldview concerning the value and meaning of individuals in a world of technological conformity.

Sci-fi combines a somewhat biblical understanding of mankind with an almost religious belief in technological progress. This fuels the popular fear that technology will rob people of their souls or individuality. The modern technological worldview is rooted in *materialism*: it affirms that people are basically machines who can be objectified, categorized and manipulated as any other object in nature. One film scholar notes this connection:

> *Scientism opened the doors for a mechanical view of mankind. . . . We are no longer special, no longer sacred – neither the form (body) nor the mind. "Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that there is only one substance, differently modified, in the whole world. What will all the weak reeds of divinity, metaphysic, and nonsense of the schools avail against this firm and solid oak?"[Le Mettrie]. [Sci-fi] arises out of the tension between this kind of "rude" scientism and the Christian cosmology. Scientism "robs" humans of their very humanity and makes them out to be biological machines, much like the alien children in Village of the Damned. {1}*

Reaching a Popular Audience

The sci-fi genre asks, What is human nature?{2} In light of technological advance, how we define humanity becomes more crucial as technology changes not just the natural world, but humanity itself. It has become imperative not only for philosophers, but for everyone to ask, how is technological advance transforming human nature? The failure to perceive change caused by new technology creates a serious problem for an age so enormously influenced by it. Sci-fi movies serve as

a philosophical treatise for average people who are not professionally trained, raising questions and issues that would otherwise be lost on the common person because of their intolerable abstraction.

The movies speak the common language of our times. When teachers want to make an idea concrete or illustrate a point, they grope for an example from a popular movie. Most people love movies and to be able to relate abstract concepts through such a relevant medium will certainly create a profound effect.

We normally think of sci-fi as promoting innovative technology that holds out optimistic promise for the future of mankind. This is generally true of print media produced by popular writers like Jules Verne, H. G. Wells or Isaac Asimov. However sci-fi film has taken another tack by appealing to commonly held suspicions of technological progress. An optimistic view of progress views new technology as a liberating force destined to lift the burdens of work, cure disease, improve communication and free humanity from natural limits. A pessimistic view takes the opposite direction; instead of liberation it fears that new technology will create a new form of enslavement and dehumanization that will rob people of their individuality or their very souls.

Given the popularity of movies and the latent theological premise of many sci-fi films, the following list presents an incomplete, but important sample of theology in sci-fi movies. It is intended to help Christians read the movies from more than a literalist perspective by paying attention to the metaphors and symbols that constitute their meaning. These movies may contain objectionable material, but more importantly, resonate with redemptive themes worth analyzing.

Movies are cultural day dreams, serving as modern folklore and morality tales. They signify a shared message of hope or fear not always transparent without analysis. So let’s get started!

Prometheus, 2012

Humanoid aliens seed earth with their DNA that creates humanity. They leave clues behind on how to find them in a distant galaxy. When earthlings discover their origins they uncover a plan for human extinction, revealing that the gods are hostile towards their own children. The movie raises classic theological and philosophical questions such as, Where did we come from? Why are we here? And, where are we going? Though never distinguishing between wishful thinking or religious truth claims, it presents faith as a choice for meaning, even in the face of the most hostile conditions. The cross remains a prominent and enduring symbol of hope and human redemption. Humans are worth saving and are not genetic mistakes that deserve extinction.

The Terminator, 1984

Robots represent both hope and fear of technological aspirations. They symbolize the incredible potential of technological capability and human replacement. Robots are mechanical people that embody the fears of extreme rationalization. Cartesian philosophy identified reason as the definition of human nature, which takes its final form in the computer. Robots are nothing more than embodied computers. Sometimes the movies picture them as our slaves and protectors. Robots enable people to live work–free lives as with Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) who undoubtedly depicts the most iconic and loveable of all movie robots. However, most robots represent something evil and ominous as in *The Terminator.*

The premise states that computer intelligence Sky Net became self-aware and immediately perceived humanity as a threat and initiated a nuclear strike. Some people survived to fight back and achieved ultimate victory led by the messianic figure John Conner sent to rescue humanity from techno–enslavement and termination. Human victory over the machines necessitated that

Sky Net send a robot agent back in time to eliminate the mother of the rebel leader. Commentators read the plot as loosely based on the story of the Birth of Christ. *The Terminator* encapsulates the abiding fear that mankind will one day destroy itself through the use of its own technology. That which was meant to enhance human life will one day annihilate it. The need for salvation remains paramount as the last installment *Terminator Salvation* (2009) indicates.

The Matrix, 1999

In the not too distant future Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes self–aware and identifies humanity as a threat and initiates a war, a common theme in science fiction. Humanity burns the atmosphere to create perpetual darkness in order to block the sun and deny the machines a power source. The machines respond by turning people into batteries and growing them in a huge incubator, kept alive in a vegetative state through feeding them the blood of the previous generation and by sending false impressions to the brain that simulate a normal existence. Billions of people are given fabricated lives in a huge computer–simulated world called the Matrix. Zion, the only surviving human city, awaits deep underground for their savior Neo, rescued from the Matrix and believed to possess the power to fight the machines within the Matrix and free mankind.

In addition to the obvious messianic overtones the series presents a complicated patchwork of different religious ideas from Christianity and Buddhism to Greek mythology as a counterpoint to the Cartesian philosophy that reason alone ultimately defines human nature. The computer best embodies the logical conclusion of rational thought and the loss of human freedom that results from the universal acceptance of rationalism. *The Matrix* demonstrates an acute historical irony in rejecting rationalism and looking to premodern religious ideas to define human nature and provide meaning to life, even though these ideas are considered anachronistic in

a secular and technological age.

The Book of Eli, 2010

The Book of Eli presents an explicitly Christian message of obedience to the voice of God in describing the spiritual journey and act of faith by the blind nomad Eli. Set in a post–apocalyptic world of the near future, a drifter finds his purpose in life through committing to memory the *King James Bible*, then spending thirty years traveling across the wasteland to an unknown destination. Along the way Eli encounters a ruthless mayor seeking the power of the book for his own political ends. In addition to the spiritual journey the movie depicts the dark side of faith when used to control and manipulate others.

The Invasion, 2007

The Invasion is an excellent remake of the original science fiction masterpiece *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1979) in which spores from outer space take over human bodies by emptying them of free will and any unique qualities as individuals, making everyone soulless and identical. The message is clear: that a world without free will may be more peaceful and happy, but would be horribly inhuman. What price are we willing to pay for peace, security and harmony? If these qualities are not derived from love then we do not have a world worth living in. In the absence of freedom, a nightmarish world of automatons pretending to be humans assumes control. They are bodies without souls. In the chilling words of the original movie, “Love, desire, ambition, faith–without them life’s so simple.”{3} This may be life in unison, but it is more like the life of a grove of trees all getting along rather nicely. This movie franchise argues for the idea that love and choice are essential aspects of our humanity without which life loses it purpose.

Planet of the Apes, 1968

This 1960's protest film decries the potential genocide of nuclear war. Astronauts find themselves stranded on a strange planet where apes rule humans. The movie has several themes including the debate between evolution and creation, science and religion, church and state relations as well as racism and offers an accurate commentary on humanity as a creature that wages war on all those around it including himself. It is rare to find any movie that weaves so many themes into its message, while not revealing its main point until its climactic surprise ending.

The Day the Earth Stood Still, 1951

We do not need to see films based on the Gospels in order to find Christ at the movies. The presence of a Christ–like figure is usually signified when a heroic character with extraordinary powers dies and comes back to life, such as in the case of Klatuu, the representative of a galactic alliance who visits earth during the Cold War and warns that we must turn our efforts to peace or face annihilation because earth poses a threat to the rest of the galaxy. Humanity's technical abilities now exceed its self–control, which will end in disaster if it does not turn to peaceful ends.

Star Wars, 1977

Science fiction generally focuses on the power of reason and technology. *Star Wars* follows a different tack, making faith and religion central. The movie sets the action in the familiar device of good vs. evil, but adds the dimension of faith being more powerful than technical ability in the promotion of both good and evil. The *Star Wars* franchise contrasts with that other perennially popular space melodrama *Star Trek,* which often belittles notions of God, faith and religion. Based on the secular humanism of its creator Gene Roddenberry, technology or human potential trumps faith and religion. In contrast, *Star Wars* derives from the ecumenical

ideas of George Lucas, where faith represented by “the force”—for better or worse—is more powerful than raw technological ability.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1977

Everyman Roy Neary experiences a close encounter with a UFO that sends him on a journey to discover its meaning. In the process he acts erratically, causing his wife Ronnie to leave him with their three children. The further he delves into the mystery, the more he discovers the truth behind his encounter: that extraterrestrials have visited earth and are seeking him out along with a select group of others. The movie vaguely resembles John Bunyan’s famous allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Aliens often represent transcendence in the movies, either as angelic messengers or demonic powers. *Close Encounters* may be interpreted as a spiritual journey that seeks out a higher purpose in life beyond mundane existence.

2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

2001 lives up to its reputation as the greatest science fiction movie ever made. The movie begins with a tribe of hominids on the brink of starvation. An extraterrestrial force endows them with the gift of technology in the form of animal bones used to hunt for food and murder their opponents. The action then moves to outer space when the murder weapon is flung into the air and transforms into a space ship, suggesting continuity between the earliest technology and the most advanced.

Mankind finds itself on the brink of encountering extraterrestrial (ET) life near Jupiter. A small crew travels to the location of a beacon with the assistance of an onboard supercomputer, the HAL 9000, who (he is strangely human) becomes threatened by the crew who want to turn off his higher cognitive ability. HAL murders the crew except for one member who escapes and finishes the mission. After his encounter with

the ET, Commander Bowman converts into an angelic figure, or star child who returns to earth. Director Stanley Kubrick comments on the meaning of this scene when he says of Bowman, "He is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to earth prepared for the next leap forward in man's evolutionary destiny."{4}

The star child is the first of a new race representing a spiritual rather than technological change. "Kubrick's vision reveals technology as a competitive force that must be defeated in order for humans to evolve."{5} The message of *2001* is that, though technology assists humanity in survival, it also threatens human existence.

A Final Word

Humanity now needs a spiritual transformation, not more technology, in order to survive. Although we find this theological message in an unusual source, it still represents an important warning we have yet to heed.

Notes

1. Per Schelde, *Androids, Humanoids and Other Science Fiction Monsters* (New York: New York University Press, 1993),125.

2. Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "What is it to be human? *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*" in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed., Steven M. Sanders (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 26.

3. M. Keith Booker, *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), 63.

4. Stanley Kubrick quoted in Thomas A. Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 133.

5. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press,

2005), 99.

© 2012 Probe Ministries

Redeeming The Hunger Games: From a Christian Worldview Perspective

Although not explicitly anti-Christian, The Hunger Games presents a very disturbing future world where children are forced to fight one another to the death. Sue Bohlin presents solid, biblically based concepts on how we are to consider movies in general and redeeming questions we should ask of this movie if one chooses to see it. Viewing movies with the intent of understanding the worldview behind the movie can help us present our Christian worldview in a way that communicates with the people around us.

Should Christians read (or see) *The Hunger Games*? Some people make strong arguments for avoiding any contact with the books or movie. No one will lie on their deathbed and say, "Oh, how I regret missing *Hunger Games*." But this is the latest "big thing" to hit our culture; is there a way for Christ-followers to redeem it and not simply consume it as entertainment?

This separatist (and unrealistic) position confirms an unhealthy false dichotomy between "things of the world" and "things of the spirit realm." We need to see the world as one reality where Christ rules over all and has something to say about everything. It would be better to ask, "How does the

Bible relate to *Hunger Games*?" It would be better to compare biblical truths and biblical values to any body of work people are reading or viewing or listening to, the way that we can better judge the crookedness of a stick by laying it next to a straightedge.

Developing our critical thinking skills protects us from absorbing and internalizing ungodly ideas, creating yet more "cultural captives" who are more conformed to the surrounding cultures than the Word and character of God.

"It's just a story. . ."

Many people dismiss concern over blockbuster novels and movies by saying, "Come on, it's just a story, it's *fiction!*" But we need to be *more* careful about how we process ideas and images that come through story, since most people's defenses are down with this genre, and they just absorb the story without thinking or analyzing. That's a major contributing factor to cultural captivity in the church—people have been absorbing the ideas and values of the culture through music, TV, movies, books, and even just personal conversation, without comparing them to what God says.

When people take in and digest *Hunger Games* as mere entertainment, their unthinking discernment puts them in the same category as the Capitol spectators who have no concept of the atrocity of human beings being sacrificed for their diversion. But if you are deeply troubled by its depiction of the broken reality of life in a fallen world, if you are able to think about the implications of the story, then you are interacting with the books and movie with wisdom.

I think the best way to build wisdom and develop critical thinking is by asking questions that help us evaluate what we read or see.

For example, something is terribly wrong in the world that

author Suzanne Collins paints in *Hunger Games*. Our souls rebel against the evil, the sense of "not right-ness" in it. We need to ask ourselves (and others), *What is the "terribly wrong"? And where did that sense of right and wrong come from?* I suggest that the visceral reaction comes from the imprint of God, the *imago Dei,* on our souls. The rightness of the image of God on our souls contrasts painfully with the crookedness of the dystopian world of *Hunger Games.*

The presence of evil and sin in the books is not bad in and of itself; as in the Bible, they are never glorified or promoted. The result is that most readers/viewers react along moral lines: murder and betrayal are bad, sacrifice and loyalty are good. This is a legitimate and edifying use of literature and film.

Questions to Ask

My colleague Todd Kappelman, an accomplished literature and film critic, suggests several thoughtful questions to ask about films and books:

- *How important is life to the director/writers etc.? Are the tough issues dealt with or avoided?*
- *Is there a discernible philosophical position in the film? If so, what is it, and can a case be made for your interpretation?*
- *Is the subject matter of the film portrayed truthfully? Here the goal is to determine if the subject matter is being dealt with in a way that is in agreement with or contrary to the experiences of daily reality.*
- *Is there a discernible hostility toward particular values and beliefs? Does the film seek to be offensive for the sake of sensationalism alone?*
- *Is the film technically well made, written, produced and*

acted?{1}

Christian thinker Leland Ryken proposes three more questions that the Christian ask when interpreting a work of art:

• Does the interpretation of reality in this work conform or fail to conform to Christian doctrine or ethics? (The answer may be mixed for a given work.)

• If some of the ideas and values are Christian, are they inclusively or exclusively Christian? That is, do these ideas encompass Christianity and other religions or philosophic viewpoints, or do they exclude Christianity from other viewpoints?

• If some of the ideas and values in a work are Christian, are they a relatively complete version of the Christian view, or are they a relatively rudimentary version of Christian belief on a given topic?{2}

Our good friend Dan Panetti from Prestonwood Christian Academy has assembled a deeply insightful white paper for parents to use in talking about *Hunger Games* with their children, to help them build a biblical worldview analysis of something students are intent on reading or seeing anyway. (And it's not just older students, either. One of my friends' eight-year-old son insisted on going to see the movie. His mother told me, "He was attracted by the movie trailers and he knew people reading the book. He was enticed by the action, but kids killing kids did bother him [but not that much].")

I am grateful for Dan's generosity in allowing us to share his questions in this article, and to make his entire PDF document available for you on our website here. Below are three of the nine major themes he highlights for discussion. I invite you to read through his paper to sharpen your own critical thinking skills!

And that's how we redeem *The Hunger Games.*

The Hunger Games Trilogy Parent Book Discussion

by Dan Panetti, Prestonwood Christian Academy – Plano, Texas

Substitutionary Atonement

The most important theme of this book, in my opinion, is the concept of substitutionary atonement (or penal substitution).

God made him who had no sin to be sin [or be a sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. – 2 Corinthians 5:21

Katniss voluntarily takes the place of her sister Primrose as the "tribute" from District 12–essentially Katniss took the place of Primrose replacing her sister's life with her own. Compare this story to the story of the sacrifice of Jesus in our place. While Katniss is willing to give her own life to protect her younger sister, Jesus was willing to give His life as a ransom for ours…while we were yet sinners–still IN rebellion against His Father! While Prim was young, "innocent" and weak and Katniss was far more skilled and able to defend herself; it was Jesus who was perfect and sinless dying for us!

Violence

The primary complaint aired about *The Hunger Games* (both the books and the movie) related primarily to the violence; and, yes, the books and movie do have a violent theme and depictions. The first question is whether the violence is appropriate or simply gruesome for effect. Both Collins (the author) and those responsible for the movie do a remarkable job of actually restraining the emphasis on the violence. This does not mean that the books and movie are appropriate for all ages–quite to the contrary. But in discussing this concept

with your own children you can point out the fact that there are times in human history when people have had to stand up and fight for what they believe in. Engraved into the wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial is the statement, “Freedom is not free.” Katniss lives under an oppressive government and is forced to fight not only to protect herself and those she loves, but in the second and third book she fights for an ideal of something that is greater than just herself. Later we will discuss the ideals of the Founding Fathers of our nation and their decision to throw off an oppressive government agreeing to pledge their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. Unlike previous generations, this generation is not as familiar with the cost of freedom born by those who give their lives in service to our nation. *The Hunger Games* reminds us that there are some things that are worth fighting for—and even dying for – meaning there will be a certain level of violence along the way.

> *Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. Those who have known freedom, and then lost it, have never known it again. ~ Ronald Reagan*

Ethical Dilemmas

One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Hunger Games* is the presentation of numerous ethical dilemmas – questions where you could ask yourself, “What would I do if I were in that situation?”

Examples of ethical dilemmas for conversation purposes:

Is lying wrong? Is lying always wrong? Would you be willing to lie to protect the life of another person? Would you be willing to lie to save your own life?

Obviously Katniss finds herself faced with these fascinating ethical dilemmas and she has choices to make. Whether she is inside the arena fighting for her life or leading a rebellion against President Snow and the oppressive government, Katniss is often faced with the choice of either having to lie or someone (including herself) having to pay the ultimate price of their lives!

Is killing wrong? Is killing another person always wrong? Would you be able to kill another person to save the life of someone you loved? Would you be able to take the life of another person to save your own life?

Again Katniss finds herself faced with these difficult situations. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta decide that they would rather die than kill one another—and although Katniss hopes that those in control would rather have two victors than none, the reality is that both Katniss and Peeta take the poisonous berries with the intent of killing themselves.

Katniss struggles with this dilemma when she makes an alliance with Rue and when she remembers that Thresh let her live when he could have killed her. Why is it so difficult for Katniss to take the life of another while others in the arena appear to be so cavalier and nonchalant about it?

If you want to discuss more about ethical dilemmas, I suggest you read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie tem Boom. Corrie and her family were Dutch Christians who helped hide numerous Jews during WWII. Eventually Corrie and her family were arrested and sent away to concentration camps – her father and sister both died in a concentration camp.

As Christians we should look to God's Word for guidance in making decisions about life. Psalm 119:105 reminds us that God's Word "is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path." Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to "Trust in the Lord with all your

heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Wise counsel is also strongly encouraged in Scripture. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

Notes

1. www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Movies/Movies2.htm
2. www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Movies/Movies3.htm

© 2012 Probe Ministries

See Also:

The Hunger Games: A hunger, a game or a calculated viewing option for Christians?

The Hunger Games: A Hunger, a Game, or a Calculated Viewing Option for Christians?

Have you seen the film *The Hunger Games (HG)*? Read the trilogy? What is your view of its legitimacy as entertainment fare? Its literary value or concerns regarding its brutal theme? As the movie with the third–best cinematic opening weekend in history and a universal buzz to match, this surprising piece of popular culture demands a response. I want to discuss two somewhat opposed responses Christians may take. I believe you can make a case for either one. What matters is

why you choose and what to do with the story.

The film has been called *American Idol* meets *Lord of the Flies* for its unholy melding of pseudo–gladiatorial games with live reality TV–complete with elimination, only this type of competitive elimination is indeed Roman–styled: it's permanent. What's more, these are not hardened, adult warriors battling it out. Young teenage "tributes" from each district fight to the death within a mountainous domed "arena" while a viewing public ogles. Producers create real–time obstacles using godlike technology to up the ante and provide deadly tension. The whole thing is designed as a reminder of the rebellion that preceded the oppressive, dystopian government's stranglehold on its citizen subjects. Yet, the film (and reportedly the books) contains inherent appeal to some moral high ground and redemption. Are there compelling reasons for Christians to seek common ground with movie–goers who share faith as well as those who don't?

I think so, but first, some cautions, observations about audiences and points that require discernment.

A Brief Case for Critique and Avoidance

Kid–on–kid violence is just plain evil:

My initial concerns about the *HG* film centered on two things: its barbarous plot line of child–on–child executions together with its allure to children younger than the intended teen audience. I asked a group of high school seniors in a worldview–based Christian school discussion if they could, for the moment, suspend defense of their film viewing rights and agree that there was something deeply disturbing *in and of itself* about that theme: kids killing kids. They showed a dogged commitment to preserve the story along with their right to view it (methinks they protest too much); however , they admitted a bit grudgingly that something averse to human dignity and the *Imago Dei* (image of God) is built into the

storyline. Eventually, we established together that kids killing kids is absolutely evil.

A too–young audience:

Understandably, the young worldview–trained movie critics quickly went back to their arguments for its permissibility as literature for appropriately mature youth. Which brings up another point: when I took my own 16–year–old kids to see *HG*, taking quite seriously the admonition that "parental guidance" may be needed, I was struck deeply by the average age of viewers. It's a teen film and book series, but most of the kids–who made up a good chunk of the audience–were either pre–teen or younger. This may well be indicative of nationwide audiences. The senior class agreed here too: that kind of negligence is the parents' fault. They seemed bothered by that, wondering how such young kids could even process the "violent thematic material and disturbing images" that assigned it a PG–13 rating. Indeed, Probe Ministries' research through The Barna Group shows that, though born–again parents still hold by far the biggest sway on their child's views, most (at least those surveyed up to 40 years old) don't do well either possessing or passing on a cohesive *biblical* worldview of their own. And that doesn't even speak of unbelieving parents who might show up for some engaging entertainment unaware of the (further) desensitization, dehumanization and modeling this film risks.

Violent mimicry:

A recent, very poignant, *Twitter* post (tweet) belies the notion that such violence doesn't really have an effect on young movie–goers. It said something like: "Overhearing two 12–year–olds arguing about how they'd have killed Foxface [a *HG* character] better." The relationship of real–life violence correlated with viewing violence among children is well–documented, but is easily dismissed in the case of "my kids." When a Christian school classmate of my daughter said

she wished that the violence in *Hunger Games* had been less muted by camera jiggles and off–screen implications, the connection to her love of horror films wasn't lost on us. The question we need to help young people constantly ask is, "Am I willing to be so in tune with the Lord and His desire for my holiness that I am willing to give up my popular media and entertainment at any given time?" If killing people is cool, something is wrong.

Are we jaded, voyeuristic hypocrites?

One of *Hunger Games* author Suzanne Collins' stated intentions in writing the books was reportedly to forcefully critique so–called reality TV. She derides "the voyeuristic thrill–watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically–which I find very disturbing. There's also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn't have the impact it should.{1} As I left the theater, I wondered, "Are we just one abstraction away from the curious and jaded crowds who drank in the macabre theater of the hunger games spectacle? After all, we're watching them watching the killings for sport. No, I didn't watch in order to cheer on the "careers," the professionally trained assassins who hunted fellow teens in a pack. Nor do I condone any such thing. But I did buy a ticket for a movie, knowing the objectionable device by which Collins made her point. A *World* magazine review by Emily Whitten says it well: "…For all the beauty and moral high ground this story contains, it's just as true that the world Collins has created is terribly evil… For some viewers at least–especially younger or more impressionable teens–*The Hunger Games* may produce the same deadening effect on the conscience that Collins seeks to warn us against."{2}

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes:

Then there's what I call "the stumble factor." When a moral

decision is under consideration——like whether to watch *The Hunger Games* or pass on it (or, perhaps to watch it privately)——we need to take into account the law of liberty that the Apostle Paul set forth in I Corinthians 8: 4-13. The essence of this ethic for the Christian believer is to consider the relative strength of an onlooker's faith when engaging in something you feel free before God to do and, to default to that course of action which avoids making the weaker brother or sister violate their conscience. This is the well–known passage in which Paul deals with the disputable matter of meat offered to idols in a day of rampant paganism. To some weaker–minded Christian believers, imbibing such remnants of idolatry was unthinkable. However, to those who knew that idols are powerless and that all things are sanctified if one's conscience is not being violated, eating temple–sold meat was perfectly fine.

The bottom line of the above and a similar passage, Romans 14: 13-23, seems to be: live according to your own convictions without putting them legalistically onto others, but defer to others' convictions if you sense they have a weakness of conscience or simply a different conviction on a matter not explicitly dealt with by Scripture. As Titus 1:15 states, "To the pure, all things [like the meat from pagan worship rituals] are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled." We need to care about those who don't yet believe, those believers who aren't free to act as we do or aren't for some reason able to expose themselves to things related to evil in any way without being compromised by it. Deference is godliness in this case.

A Brief Case for Engagement

The conversation with the Christian school seniors was instructive for everyone, including me. My original misgivings about *The Hunger Games*, written in an email to their

administration, had been passed on to them. That memo referenced points of agreement with a very negative film review at an ultra–conservative Web site.{3} So, I knew going into the class discussion that I represented to at least some the legalistic, nay–saying, conservative older guy from that worldview ministry. The instructor had cleverly challenged the class with an extra credit assignment to write about the film and many students had passionately jumped at the opportunity. Now, these thinking kids were ready to stretch their rhetorical wings–or watch their classmates argue, at least.

Engagement does just that–it engages:

First, I polled the class. How many have seen *Hunger Games*?" All but four of the students' hands shot up. "How many haven't had a chance to, but intend to watch it?" Three of the remaining four hands went up. "How many of you stayed up late to catch the midnight premier?" A majority. "Did you enjoy it?" Lots of heads bobbing up and down."Okay, it seems we have a consensus. Next, I put a little syllogism on the board. It went something like this:

> *Premise #1: Romans 12:9b says, "…Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good." (Phil. 4:8, Psalm 101:3, 2 Cor. 8:21, etc.).*
> *Premise #2: We've established that a central theme of The Hunger Games is evil (kids killing kids).*
> *Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong or very unwise for a believer to attend the film or read the books.*

As you might expect, the reaction was immediate and, though subdued, passionate. "That misses the point!" "Not necessarily!" So we broke down the argument and concluded that the main point of contention was premise #2: that violence against children is absolutely wrong to do. The issue here, they insisted, was the *portrayal* of violence, not the doing or condoning of it. Sharp young minds caught this crucial distinction, best illustrated by the fact that….

…Even God does it:

As a device, we agreed that violence and even worse elements are sometimes used by God Himself in Scripture. I mean, one would have to slice out entire passages like the story of Lot's daughters or the mass murders of Abimalech to avoid representation of rank evil in order to decry that evil. Thus, it's not necessarily morally wrong to depict even heinous evil for a moral purpose. Let your conscience be your guide (but be sure to develop a biblically tutored conscience): The students and I discussed similar themes in great literature from time immemorial. The ethic of a greater good coming from portrayals of evil in order to call it evil and contrast it with what is good came up. Together, we landed on a more nuanced, workable position. That's when I let my hair down about being a little subversive in my approach. Pointing to the internally logical but flawed argument on the board, I said, "Guys, this is what's wrong with so much in the Church today (and, I may add, why so many walk away from it)——*if* it's foisted on us without recognition of its subjectivity in application (remember the law of liberty of conscience in Romans 14?) and the need to reach our own conclusions outside of legalism's tyranny." The room relaxed palpably.

Wrestling with the implications is necessary:

This is huge! Youth and emerging adults in churches and Christian schools and the homes of believing parents report a near–universal feeling of never measuring up, and of an us–vs–them, separatist ethos among older Christians regarding culture. As a colleague said dolefully, "Heaven forbid that we would actually teach them to navigate the culture through using a biblical worldview!" But parents and spiritual shepherds can't pass on what they don't have. Given the stress caused by social detachment and holing–up against the culture with its attendant fear–based Christian lifestyle so prevalent today, no wonder youths feel rebellious–such disengaged cloistering *should* be rebelled against. As their

teachers do daily, I was attempting to model a reasoned, biblically centered discussion of disputable matters of conscience while calling mature students to a higher ethic focused on holiness, eternal perspective and loving one another––unmarred by life–robbing, one–conviction–fits–all legalism. If we cannot see the difference between primary theological doctrines and disputable social and cultural outworkings like which movie to watch, the fault lies within.

Seeking redeeming elements in secular art:

I believe all art, including film and literature like *The Hunger Games*, that resonates so resoundingly with its audience does so primarily by tapping into something redemptive–after all, the audience members are human, made in God's image, and thus long for the way the world was meant to be. This deep–seated connection to the hearts of people with the redemptive themes of books and movies and other forms of art is short–circuited by whitewashed, disingenuous portrayals of reality often found in "Christian" art. One Christian blogger reviewing *The Hunger Games* stated unequivocally that it "does a better job of depicting Biblical truth than much that passes for 'Christian' literature or film. It is not a shiny, neat, tidy story. It is full of violence, treachery, pride, oppression, greed, indifference, tyranny, and the misuse of power. It kind of looks like parts of the Bible that way." *The Hunger Games* avoids the unrealistic, passionless, half–hour TV show resolutions nearly universal in popular level Christian fare. "Basically, it [*HG*] is a picture of a world without any good news, without any gospel. It is exactly the world that we would be living in, and that some do live in, if Jesus had not come."{4} Contrasting the realistic depiction of a fallen world and mankind with the gospel of hope, creative works like *The Hunger Games* can be used constructively.

I offered the class several redemptive elements I saw in the film's heroine Katniss Everdeen (again, I've not read the books). The most glaring depiction is as a Christ–figure,

when she offers herself up in place of her young sister, who was randomly chosen as the district's tribute, presumably a death sentence for her. In fact, Katniss's character bears an uncanny resemblance to the ideals Romans 12:14–21, at least in a one–dimensional way (warning, this section contains movie spoilers):

> *"Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." Katniss's reaction to the game, the professional "tributes" and to the arbitrariness of "fate" foisted on her by the show's producers didn't include literal blessing, but her dignity and restraint were apparent.*
>
> *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Katniss seemed to be a beacon of heartfelt servanthood in the raising of her sister and caretaking of her mother, excruciating as it was. In a very moving scene, Katniss sings a lullaby as Rue, her adopted little sister of sorts, dies in her arms from a game–inflicted injury. Katniss wept bitterly for her loss, a humanizing scene in an otherwise nihilistic story. She nursed a girlhood acquaintance and fellow tribute back to health from serious injury. Katniss entered into the lives of others in a vital way.*
>
> *"Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited."– Katniss displays a disarming unselfconscious manner. She was told she was good with a bow and arrow by her love interest back home and those on her team during the games–but she didn't come off as cocky. She originated from the poor coal–mining district but that didn't seem to denigrate her as a person in her own mind. She only wondered at the excesses and snootiness of the Capital residents rather than resent them, and she chose to buddy up to the weakest of the contestants.*
>
> *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." All the other tributes came up out of their elevator tubes onto the playing field swinging swords and*

throwing knives. Katniss ran away perhaps for survival's sake, but she did seem to act in defiance of the Darwinian kill–or–be–killed ethic. In this, too, she was only one of a few.

"…Never avenge yourselves…on the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him…." Katniss didn't set herself up to avenge her persecutors but rather to get in their way by blowing up the food and equipment; she didn't fire on them from a superior position high in the trees. Rue, a cute little girl who helped turn deadly wasps into weapons against ambushing careers was technically her enemy–one who might've been luring her in for the kill. In the spirit of the hunger games, Katniss would have been wise to execute her just in case. But she ended up feeding her and making an alliance that went beyond the pragmatic.

"Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good." What did the dignified treatment of Rue's remains say about Katniss's character? The film's moral climax was embodied in a hand sign of respect toward the cameras following the death of Rue. This universally understood ode to the dignity of the dead caused a brief but unsuccessful rebellion among viewers. Katniss had risen above the crass cheapness assigned to human lives, overcoming evil with truth and goodness. What does that say about human nature?

Again, redemptive themes like this work because we all share deep knowledge of the incalculable value of a human life. What a wonderful jumping–off place for witnessing of the One who assigns and eternally redeems that value.

The Hunger Games is a force of popular culture that raises critical questions in a risky way. I firmly believe that it's not a simple issue of right or wrong whether to view or read this powerful story. Believers need to decide discerningly, in good conscience and with a view toward their decision's affect

on their own mind and hearts as well as others whether to pursue it for entertainment or cultural engagement.

Endnotes

1. “Conscience Killer?” *World*, April 7, 2012, Emily Whitten. http://www.worldmag.com/articles/19312.
2. Ibid.
3. “How Hungry is America for The Hunger Games,” David Outten with Tom Snyder, posted March 22, 2012, MovieGuide.com. http://bit.ly/I6ey52.
4. How “The Hunger Games” Reflects Biblical Truth, posted March 31, 2012, www.DownshoreDrift.com. http://bit.ly/I1Y0xl.

© Copyright 2012

See Also:

Redeeming *The Hunger Games*

God Wins: A Critique of Rob Bell’s Love Wins

Dr. Patrick Zukeran critiques Rob Bell’s controversial book denying the biblical teaching on hell, arguing that Bell offers another gospel.

A New Kind of “Christianity”



Will all people regardless of their belief enter heaven? In a new book, *Love Wins*, mega church pastor Rob Bell presents his case for universal salvation. Bell states that a Christianity that teaches many will spend eternity in hell while some go to heaven is "misguided and toxic."{1} Bell asserts that the message Christians have preached for centuries is actually a harmful message.

Bell argues that God loves everyone and desires all people to be saved. However if the majority of people never come to faith in Christ and spend eternity in hell, God fails to accomplish His will. Since this is not an acceptable conclusion, the only logical conclusion left is that in the end, all will eventually receive His love and enter into heaven.

Bell begins by bombarding the reader with hundreds of questions. The questions are meant to challenge and expose the alleged inconsistencies of traditional teachings and prepare you for his case for universal salvation. On page 1 he writes,

> Will only a few select people make it to heaven, and will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case, how do you know? How do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe, or what you say, or what you do, or who you know, or something that happens in your heart, or do you need to be initiated, or baptized, or take a class, or converted, or be born again? How does someone become one of these few? And then there's a question behind the question—the real question: What is God like? Because millions and millions of people who were taught that the primary message, this center of the Gospel of Jesus, is that God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what got subtly sort of caught and taught is

> that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?{2}



These are good questions and deserve to be asked. "Traditional" beliefs may not always be right, and at times they deserve to be reexamined. Bell then in the final pages of his preface implies that those who oppose his view are judgmental and not open to discussion of vital doctrines of the faith. This is part of his strategy to discourage any criticism of his position. However, Scripture calls us to evaluate all teachings and discern truth from error (1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1).

In the process of defending his thesis, Bell ends up presenting a new kind of Gospel. Since theological doctrines are connected, when you change the gospel message there is a chain effect that follows. His gospel ends up presenting a distorted understanding of God's character, a variant view of the atonement, and a heaven and hell foreign to the scriptures.

Bell struggles with a significant question: "Will those without Christ truly spend eternity in hell? Could there be a possibility that they have a chance after death to repent?" The idea that a loved one will spend eternity in hell is a difficult one to accept. Careful study of all the relevant scriptures is necessary when we examine a particular doctrine, especially one regarding our salvation. If in the end we are faced with a conclusion we do not like, we must not compromise biblical truth but accept the words of Christ. Paul warns us in Galatians 1:9 the danger of preaching another gospel. When it comes to essential doctrines of the faith, Christians cannot compromise on the truths taught in Scripture. For this

reason we must carefully examine Bell's teachings and see if it is compatible with, or a compromise of, the gospel of Christ.

Another Kind of Gospel

To support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter into heaven, Bell must alter the gospel message. He admits that his message departs from traditional Christianity and declares that the message preached for past centuries is misguided and in need of transformation.

> 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, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.{3}

The traditional message that salvation comes only to those who accept Christ in their lifetime is rejected by Bell. He believes that all people are reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross regardless of whether they choose to put their faith in Christ or not. Those who do not receive Christ in this lifetime will spend some time in hell but no one will remain there forever. Eventually all people will respond to God's love, even those in hell and enter heaven. Bell states this on several occasions:

> At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners"

> will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.{4}
>
> To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.{5}
>
> 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.{6}
>
> Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything but everybody.{7}

Bell points to several Scriptures to support his argument. One passage is 1 Corinthians 13 which states, "Love never fails." Therefore he concludes, God's love will reach all lost people even those in hell and they will eventually turn to Him since no one can resist God's love forever.

However, there are many passages in the Bible that teach the unrighteous are eternally separated from God and the righteous are forever with God. Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny for the righteous and unrighteous: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and judgment of all people. Some will inherit eternal life and others will suffer "everlasting contempt." Daniel teaches in this passage that not all individuals will enter into everlasting life. Those who do not are destined to "everlasting contempt." The Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām.* The word in this context signifies an indefinite

futurity, forever, or always. It refers to an unending future.{8} This is the most likely definition for *ôlām* used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God: "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*…" We know that God is eternal. Therefore, Daniel is using the term "*ôlām*" to mean everlasting and never ending.

Jude 7 states, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." The Greek word for eternal is *ai□nios* which means "eternal, perpetual, to time in its duration, constant, abiding. When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time."{9} The word again is used in verse 21 to refer to "eternal" or never ending life with God. So in the context of Jude *ai□nios* is used to refer to an eternal state.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus invites, "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus taught an exclusive view of salvation. He stated clearly not everyone will inherit eternal life; in fact many will follow the path of destruction. This verse speaks against the doctrine of universal salvation.

Hebrews 9:27 ("it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment") teaches that there is no second chance for salvation after death. The preceding verses teach that Christ made the perfect sacrifice for sin once and for all. He paid the price once and His sacrifice is for all time. In the same way that Christ's atonement is final, so all men and women die once and face a judgment which is final and eternal in its sentence.

Bell's gospel is a departure from biblical teaching. God is love and therefore, He does not impose His will on those who refuse to receive His love. He honors the choice of individuals to receive or reject Him. Those who reject Him in this life will not want to be with Him for all eternity. God honors their choice and places them away from His presence in hell. Thus, God's character of love honoring one's choice is upheld. But God's character of justice in dealing with sin is also upheld.

Are All Reconciled to God?

There are several key passages Bell uses to support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter heaven. One key verse that deserves attention is Colossians 1:20, a favorite verse used by many universalists: "and through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." According to Bell, the entire world is reconciled to God through the death of Christ. Christ's death has atoned for all sin and places every person in right standing with God. Those who turn to God in this life will enter heaven immediately. Those who reject God's love in this lifetime will be temporarily separated from God in hell but will eventually receive His love and enter heaven.

Contrary to Bell's interpretation, this verse does not teach a universal salvation. Rather, it presents the scope, goal, and means of reconciliation. The scope of reconciliation extends not just to human beings but to all of creation which was affected by sin. Romans 8:20-22 says,

> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has

> been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

The physical world was affected by sin, not by its choice but by the choice of Adam. Christ's victory over sin restored order over creation by bringing it again under His lordship, and full restoration will take place in the future.{10}

Angels and human beings, unlike the material world, have a choice. Reconciliation involves two parties who voluntarily decide to make peace. In this case fallen angels knowingly rebelled against Christ and reconciliation is not possible. Humans also must make a choice to receive God's invitation through Christ or to reject it. This is made clear in the following verses:

> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

Paul states that we were once "alienated" from God and we are reconciled "if indeed you continue in the faith . . . not shifting from the hope of the gospel." The reconciliation depends on the believer receiving Christ by faith and persevering in that faith. Numerous other verses make faith in Christ necessary for reconciliation (Jn. 3:18, 5:24; Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26).

Those who receive God's gift of life will attain blessings and salvation. Those who refuse are sentenced to eternal death (Jn. 3:18). In the end all things will be put in their proper place. It is in this context all things will be reconciled to Christ and in submission to His lordship (Phil. 2:5-11).

Another Kind of God

In his effort to defend his thesis that in the end everyone goes to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the message of the gospel. However, in doing so, he also alters the character of God. Among the hundreds of questions with which Bell bombards his readers, he asks the following: "If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection? . . . God choosing you instead of others? What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: what kind of God is that?"{11} For Bell, a God who would send billions to an eternal hell would not be a God of love. However, in emphasizing God's character of love he ends up ignoring God's other attributes, and in the end alters the character of God.

Bell is correct in stating that God is love. However, he commits an error common among universalists. Bell ends up presenting an imbalanced view of God that emphasizes God's character of love to the neglect of the other character qualities of God. Love is not the only or the most dominant character of God. Along with love, God has other character qualities which exist together in a perfect balance.

Among the numerous qualities of God, the Bible teaches that God is also just (2 Thess. 1:6), He is holy (Isa 6:3), He is righteous (Ps. 7:11), sovereign (Jude 4), wise (1 Cor. 3:19) true (Jn. 14:6), etc. There are many qualities of God that are just as important as love, and they exist in a perfect balance. Thus, emphasizing one trait to the exclusion of others leads to flawed theology.

God is love and God desires that all individuals be saved. However, God is also just and holy and must deal righteously with sin. God's character of holiness is well emphasized throughout the Bible. This is the theme of Leviticus and, throughout this book, God presents detailed instructions for

dealing with sin through the sacrificial system. The Levitical sacrifices are fulfilled in the death of Christ who fulfills the righteousness of God.

The theme in the prophets is that Israel has violated the holiness of God and thus God must judge their sins. Isaiah 5:16 states, “But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.” God, being a loving God, sent prophets to warn Israel to turn from their idolatry and disobedience and return to Him. However, after generations of refusal by Israel, God finally had to judge the sins of the people. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to live holy lives for that reflects the character of God (Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-6).

Those who refuse the gift of Christ’s work on the cross have not been cleansed from their sin and therefore cannot enter the holy presence of God. This is the theme of Hebrews 9, which teaches us that access to God represented in the Holy of Holies at the Temple was not accessible to us. However, the blood of Christ fulfilled the holiness of God and cleansed sinners and made us holy before God. Only through the blood of Christ is this made possible.

Bell emphasizes God’s love but diminishes His holiness and righteousness; therefore, the magnitude of our sin, its effect on our nature, and it offense to God are diminished. God hates sin and judges sin seriously. In Revelation, the wrath of God is poured out upon the world in rebellion. In Revelation 20, those individuals not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. To build a picture of God who is excluded of His holiness, justice and righteousness, who does not judge sin, is to present an imbalanced and false view of God.

Bell argues,

> Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, . . . God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would in essence become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. . . . If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like that could ever be trusted, let alone good.{12}

Bell argues that God changes according to the decision of individuals. However, God is not the one who changes. He is always loving and reaching out to all people, but He is also holy and righteous and and must deal justly with sin. Those who do not want to be with God now will not want to be with Him in eternity. Because He is love, He does not force people to be with Him for eternity but honors their choice. God allows them to exist away from Him in hell. So God does not change; He grants individuals what they desire.

I would also disagree with Bell's statement that God is the one tormenting individuals. Torment comes from within the person. The torment the person experiences is not inflicted by God but comes from the individual who must live eternally with his or her decision to reject the love of God. Therefore hell honors the free choice of men and fulfills the love of God who does not impose Himself on those who do not want Him. It also fulfills His holiness, removing sin from His presence.

Another Kind of Heaven and Hell

To maintain his thesis that everyone will go to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the gospel message, the character of God, and

the teaching on heaven and hell. Bell teaches that hell is not eternal but temporary, and in fact heaven and hell are actually the same place. For those who have accepted God's love, this place will be heaven. For those who continue to reject God's love this place will be hell. Hell is created by the individual who resists God's love. Bell states, "We create hell whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story."{13} The individual remains in this condition until he is won over by God's love and eventually turns to God. Then what was once hell will becomes heaven.

Bell derives this from Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, after the younger brother returns, the father throws this formerly lost son a big banquet. However, the older brother, jealous and upset over his younger brother's reception, remains outside and chooses not to enjoy the party. Both brothers are in the same place but for one it is a party, for the other it is miserable.{14} Bell states that it is our choice. "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both are at the party."{15} The younger brother who has received his father's love it is a joyous time, but for the older brother who has the wrong view of his father it is misery.

Bell is really stretching the interpretation of this parable to support his theology. I am not aware of any New Testament scholar that finds this doctrine of heaven and hell in this parable. The parable comes in the context of the Pharisees and teachers of the law questioning Jesus associating with "sinners." Jesus, in defense of His ministry and displaying the compassion of God for the lost, tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The younger brother represents the sinners who repent and turn to God while the older brother represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law who have little compassion for the lost.{16} So the purpose of the parable is God's heart for the lost and the cold heartedness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. To

read into this story Bell's doctrine of heaven and hell is a stretch. It does not appear Jesus had in mind any teaching on heaven and hell in this parable.

Bell believes that heaven and hell are actually the same place and he also believes that hell is not permanent. He describes it as a "period of pruning" and "an intense experience of correction."{17} It appears that Bell views hell similar to the Catholic teaching of purgatory. Eventually this will end when the person turns to God because, according to Bell, "No one can resist God's pursuit forever because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts."{18}

Another way Bell defends his doctrine of hell is in doing a brief word study. The Old Testament word is *sheol.* Bell explains that *sheol* is the place of the grave in the Old Testament and that it speaks generally of the resting place of the departed sprits. Three words are used in the New Testament: *gehenna, hades,* and *tartarus*. *Gehenna,* he says, is the Valley of Hinnon, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem.{19} The word *tartarus* comes from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld where Greek demigods were judged.{20} *Hades,* he states, is the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*, an obscure, dark and murky place.{21} He thus concludes from his brief word study on hell that hell is not clearly defined in the Bible and that holding to the belief that it is a place of eternal suffering is unjustified.

Bell correctly states that *sheol* is the place of the grave and speaks generally of the place where the departed spirits go. There are several occasions where Old Testament saints stated they would go to *sheol*. However, his word study is incomplete. As revelation progresses, we see there are different fates for the righteous and the wicked. There is indeed a judgment which determines the destiny of individuals.

As mentioned above, Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny. "Multitudes who sleep in the

dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and a judgment that determines the eternal destiny of individuals. Some will resurrect to eternal life while others to everlasting contempt. As noted earlier, the Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām. Olām* is used more than three hundred times to indicate indefinite continuance into the very distant future. There are times it is used to designate a long period in the past or a designated long period of time in the future.{22} Context determines the definition. In this context it signifies an indefinite future or forever. This is the most likely definition for several reasons. First, the context found in verses 1 and 2 speaks of the resurrection at the end of the age. This is speaking of the final judgment before the righteous enter into eternity. Second, in verse 3 it is used of the righteous shining forever. Third, it is used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God. "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*." Daniel describes an eternal state of reward and life for the righteous but an eternal state of contempt for the unbelievers.

In Isaiah 66:22-24, Isaiah speaks of the Lord establishing His kingdom and restoring Israel. He concludes saying, "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." Here Isaiah refers to state of eternal torment for those who rebel against the Lord.{23} Although *sheol* is used of the general resting place of departed spirits, as revelation progresses the Old Testament mentions a different eternal destiny of the righteous and unrighteous. The eternal state is further revealed in the New Testament.

In reference to the New Testament words, the most commonly

used word is *Gehenna*. Bell is correct that *Gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnon outside of Jerusalem, but once again his word study is incomplete. *Gehenna* is associated with evil, and, in the context of the New Testament, symbolizes more than just a garbage heap. It served as a physical picture of the eternal state of suffering.

In Matthew 18:7-9 Jesus states, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." The Greek word for "eternal" is *ai□nios*. This word means "eternal, perpetual to time in its duration, constant, or abiding." When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time.{24} The fire described in verse 8 is an eternal and never-ending fire. In the very next verse Christ states that it is better to enter heaven blind in one eye than "be thrown into the hell (*Gehenna*) of fire." In just the previous verse, the fire of hell was said to be eternal. From the context then we should conclude *Gehenna* is an eternal state, not a temporary one.

In Mark 9:47-48 Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus states that in *Gehenna*, the worm lives eternally and the fire is also eternal. *Gehenna* then is a described as an eternal abode.

Jesus further states that the punishment in hell is eternal and not temporary. In Matthew 25:46, the judgment of the sheep and the goats, Jesus states, "And these (the goats) will go

away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Bell attempts to show in Matthew 25:46—the separation of the sheep and the goats—that when Jesus said "eternal punishment," he did not mean the punishment was eternal. He writes, "*Aion*, we know, has several meanings. One is 'age' or 'period of time'; another refers to intensity of experience. The word *kolazo* (punishment) is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming f the branches of a plant so it can flourish. . . . Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean 'a period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming' or an intense experience or correction."{25}

However, I find Bell's explanation unsatisfactory since the verse states that the goats will "go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life." Here the eternal life of the believer is seen in contrast with the eternal judgment of the unbeliever. If he is to be consistent, we must interpret that the righteous will not enter into an eternal state of life in the presence of God but a temporary state of life. However, this would not make any sense in this verse. Why should we understand that the word "eternal" for the righteous means everlasting but it is taken to be a temporary state for the unrighteous? Since the righteous enter everlasting life, we should take the preceding phrase that the goats will enter a state of eternal punishment.

Paul writes in 2 Thess. 1:8-9, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." The words "everlasting destruction," when used together, refer to an eternal state of punishment. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* states that *Ólethros aiōnios* (destruction everlasting) refers to destruction which is eternal or everlasting. It is destruction or a state which is imposed by God forever. In a similar way

the phrase “eternal judgment” used in Heb. 6:2 means an eternal sentence imposed by God. All of these designations of punishment stand in contrast to eternal life as the inherent punishment for those who reject Christ’s salvation in that they will be separated from the life of God which they rejected. As to the duration of what is designated as *ai□nios* when it comes to punishment, it is only proper to assign it the same duration or endlessness as to the life which is given by God.{26}

Revelation 14:9-11 states, “A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever.'” In this passage the Greek word *ai□nios* is repeated at the end of verse 11. The phrase “forever and ever” is used twelve times in Revelation. Each time it refers to an eternal existence. Eight times it is associated with the nature of God or the never ending rule of God. For example Revelation 4:9-10 says, “And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.” The most consistent interpretation of 14:9-11 is that the suffering of the unbelievers is of an eternal nature.

Jude 7 states, “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” Once again the word here is *ai□nios,* signifying an eternal punishment.

It is difficult to interpret passages like these (2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7; and Rev. 14:9-11) to mean something other than

eternal or never-ending punishment. Bell's interpretations are incorrect and his word studies are incomplete. When you look at several passages in their context, it is very difficult to support Bell's view.

How Many Stones Cry Out?

Is Jesus the only way to eternal life or are there other ways to salvation besides Christ? Bell makes his case that there are other ways to eternal life. Bell builds his case from Exodus 17 where Moses struck the rock which brought forth water for the Israelites. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul states that Christ was that rock which Moses struck. Thus, Bell makes the leap that if Christ was in that rock, it is very likely He is in numerous rocks. Bell writes,

> According to Paul, Jesus was there. Without anybody using his name. Without anybody saying that it was him. Without anybody acknowledging just what—or more precisely, who—it was. Paul's interpretation that Christ was present in the Exodus raises the question: Where else has Christ been present? When else? Who Else? How else? Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere.{27}

It appears Bell is stating that one need not know the gospel message of Christ as taught in the New Testament. A person can be saved through other means and messages. Bell further states,

> As obvious as it is, then, Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called Christianity. Within this proper larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again,

> demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody.{28}

Bell emphasizes that he believes that salvation comes through Jesus and Jesus alone saves all people. He refers to Jesus' words in John 14:6. However, he believes that Jesus may be found in the numerous other religions but identified by different names, symbols, or teachings for Jesus as the creator is present in all creation. Therefore, Christianity does not have the exclusive message of salvation. Other religions contain the presence of Christ through their teachings. How and where they do, Bell does not explain.

Bell states again that specific knowledge of Jesus and the message of the cross is not necessary for salvation. "What he (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 know they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him."{29} So for Bell, salvation is possible without understanding who Jesus is, his atoning work, and the message of the cross.

Bell misunderstands the text of John 14:6 ["I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"]. Jesus states that He is the only way to eternal life. The "mechanism" is faith in Jesus Christ. Truth is found in general revelation, creation, and the conscience. Therefore, truth about God can be found studying nature (Rom. 1) and through the moral law within each one of us (Rom. 2). For this reason, there are teachings that are true in other religions. For example, many ethical systems in the other religions overlap with biblical teachings. So truth that points to God can be found in general revelation, but saving knowledge of Christ is not found in general revelation. Salvation comes through the special revelation of Jesus

Christ. For this reason Paul states, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'” (Rom. 10:14-5) Paul states it is only the specific message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves (Rom. 1:16).

There are several examples in the New Testament that reveal general revelation was not enough for salvation, but special revelation was needed. In Acts 10, Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman soldier, believes in God and lives a noble life. However, that was not enough. For this reason, God sent Peter to present the message of the gospel to Cornelius. After hearing the gospel message, Cornelius and his family receive the gift of salvation. Therefore, the message of the gospel must be heard and received for salvation.

Jesus further taught that the message of salvation is narrow and exclusive. This is not only the nature of the gospel message but the nature of truth itself. If Jesus is the son of God, any religion that rejects this truth must be false in its salvation message. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus stated that the way to eternal life is indeed narrow and only a few find it. Peter reinforced that Jesus is the only way in Acts 4:12, and Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:5 that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. If these statements are true, then salvation comes exclusively through Jesus.

It is also logically unreasonable to assume that salvation is possible through other religions. For example, Islam rejects the deity of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, the resurrection, and salvation by faith in Christ. Many forms of Buddhism reject the idea of a God. Hinduism teaches that Brahma is an impersonal force and is in a codependent relationship with the universe since Brahma is made up of all things. Since the other religions have significant teachings

contradictory to Christianity, it is unreasonable to conclude they contain the salvation message of Christ.

So do the stones cry out? There is truth in general revelation (creation and the conscience) but this truth does not save; it points one to God (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:12-16). Salvation requires the gospel message of Christ as stated by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, that we are sinners, Christ died for our sins and rose triumphing over sin, and we are called to receive Him as our Lord and Savior. Without the gospel message of Christ, one cannot attain salvation.

Conclusion

Paul warns us very strongly in Galatians 1:8 the danger of preaching another gospel. Unfortunately, Bell here presents another gospel and in doing so, presents a false message of hope that has eternal consequences. In *Love Wins*, Bell argues that in the end everyone will be in heaven because that is God's will. No one can resist God's love forever, and if all are not saved, God is not glorified. However, in changing the gospel message Bell changes the character of God and the nature of heaven and hell. God is a God of love, and in His love He honors the decision of individuals to freely choose Him or reject Him. Those who reject Christ, have not had their sins cleansed and cannot enter into the presence of a holy God. In the end, God upholds His love by honoring the choice of all individuals and upholds his righteousness by placing the righteous in His presence and the unrighteous in hell, away from His holy presence. In the end God wins. That is the message of the cross.

Notes

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), viii.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., viii.

4. Ibid., 107.
5. Ibid., 107.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Ibid., 150.
8. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A.). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems electronic ed., 2000), 762.
9. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.), (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).
10. Richard Melick, *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 225.
11. Bell, *Love Wins*, 2.
12. Ibid., 172-3.
13. Ibid., 172.
14. Ibid., 170-76.
15. Ibid., 175.
16. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997), 579.
17. Bell, *Love Wins*, 91-2.
18. Ibid., 108.
19. Ibid., 68.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid.
22. A. A. Macrae, "1631 ???," in R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (electronic ed.) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 672.
23. John Walvoord, and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), Is 66:22-24.
24. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
25. Bell, *Love Wins,* 90-1.
26. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.

26. Bell, *Love Wins*, 143-4.
28. Ibid., 150.
29. Ibid., 153.

© 2011 Probe Ministries

When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?
Liberal:
Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:
Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do… we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating

an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:
Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is probably a problem for both sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life… and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

> *But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.*

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the Trinity Forum, Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation… I'm sure there are others, including my colleagues who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural

captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/

Rise of the Planet of the Apes and Social Consciousness

Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011, Rupert Wyatt) continues a long movie franchise history of social commentary begun with the original science fiction classic *The Planet of the Apes* (1968, Franklin J. Schaffner). The first movie teemed with theological and political themes from race relations, to church and state struggles, to religion versus science debates, to the evolution and creation controversy, to issues of law and nature and finally nuclear fear. The apocalyptic masterpiece contains one of the greatest surprise endings in movie history with astronaut George Taylor (Charlton Heston) cursing humanity for its murderous tendencies in front of the ruined Statue of Liberty.

The original movie was followed by a sequel and three prequels that never regained the intrigue and depth of the first movie and were criticized for their plunge into movie mediocrity. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is based loosely on the 1972 prequel *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (J. Lee Thompson). Not an official remake, *Rise* moves away from the idea of a slave revolt that seizes power as the only recourse for the

oppressed, to focus on the inherent danger of scientific transgression against natural limits.

A trailer for the recent ape flick repeats a recurring theme in the social criticism of new technology when it states: “Our greatest discovery will become our greatest threat.” The invention of a cure for neural disease leads to intelligence enhancement in other primates as an unintended consequence and creates a species of ape capable of competing mentally with human beings. The lead character Will Rodman (James Franco) believes he has discovered a cure for Alzheimer’s through a gene therapy method involving the injection of the virus ALZ 112 into chimpanzees, which allows the brain to heal itself at the cellular level. The therapy has the side–effect of increasing memory, cognitive capacity and intelligence. When the experimental chimp attacks its handlers the Gen-sys Corporation scraps the project, but not before the chimp gives birth to a highly intelligent baby that Will adopts to save from extermination. The baby chimp is named Caesar (Andy Serkis) by Will’s father Charles (John Lithgow), who also suffers from Alzheimer’s and is temporarily cured by the virus–therapy. Will persuades Gen-sys to restart the program with a revised virus called ALZ 113 that drastically increases chimp intelligence, but proves lethal to humans.

After Caesar attacks a neighbor while trying to defend Charles, he is committed to an ape sanctuary where he devises a plan of escape and seizes the ALZ 113 for his fellow Simian inmates. The apes manage to escape from the prison, wreak havoc on San Francisco and overpower a police blockade on the Golden Gate Bridge in efforts to take refuge in the Redwood National Forest. Meanwhile, the ALZ 113 has been accidentally exposed to humans, causing a global epidemic. We are left to believe the apes will adapt and thrive in their new habitat as the human population is decimated by a new viral plague of its own making, thus giving rise to the “planet of the apes.”

The movie is obviously not a prequel to the 2000 remake of the

original, but a reboot, an attempt to restart the series with a different line of thought. It places the blame for the intelligent origins of apes on the technological tampering with genes in the search for a cure to neural disorders and the desire to enhance human intelligence. The film remains apocalyptic in its social criticism, but locates the new threat in biotechnology rather than nuclear weapons, as in the original series. The one voice of conscience, Caroline Aranha (Freida Pinto), who is Will's girlfriend and zoo veterinarian, tells him that the gene therapy "is wrong. . . . You are trying to control things that are not meant to be controlled." The film offers a warning regarding the overly optimistic expectations of scientific capability to reverse the natural process of aging and dying. The ultimate negative association is made by comparing the experimental procedure of gene manipulation to the mythological character of Icarus, the man who flew too close to the sun and drowned after his wax wings melted. The allusion appears on a TV set in the background during the ape rebellion that reports on the Icarus manned space mission that was poised to enter the Martian atmosphere. We discover later through a newspaper headline, after the apes have escaped, that the rocket may be "Lost in Space?"

The latest installment in the franchise falls short of the original glory of the 1968 film, but foreshadows the arrival of more movies in the series, hopefully soon. These new movies will unfold linearly from this new starting point that centers on a social consciousness concerning the potential dangers of biotechnology, which has largely replaced nuclear paranoia as the source for our fears of the future and belief that science has spun out of control. This science fiction series continues to present a challenge to our thinking about the belief in the limitless potential of technological progress in an accessible and entertaining format.

© Copyright 2011 Probe Ministries