

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

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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 Abimelech 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>.

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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 *aiōnios* 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 *aiōnios* 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 its 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 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 become 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 spirits. 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 *aiōnios*. 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 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 of 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 *aiōnios* 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 *aiōnios* 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 *aiōnios*, 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. 10:14-15) 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.
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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.

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.

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(Ir)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair

Have you heard all the brouhaha over the new book by pastor Rob Bell, *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived?* Bell seems to be one of those prominent Christians who are either loved or hated. He is a well-known member of the emerging church and has been associated (rightly or wrongly) with a particular stream of it called the Emergent Church. It can be hard to keep all the labels straight and which belongs on which person, and I won't try to iron it all out here. What's significant, though, is that Bell has been accused of playing fast and loose with historic Christian doctrine. The specific accusation now is *universalism*, the belief that everyone will be saved. Just as I won't try to sort out the emerging/Emergent arms of the church, I won't go into detail on Bell's beliefs either. In fact, it's the reactions to (or, I should say, against) Bell's book that I'm interested in.

I first heard about Bell's forthcoming book some weeks ago. Last week a friend posted a link to an interview of Rob Bell by MSNBC's Martin Bashir conducted on Monday, March 14^{1}. I watched the interview online the next day and then did a search on the Net and found dozens of blogs and web sites with articles about it and the book.

Two things stood out to me. First, quite a few of the writers had not read Bell's book. They had read a blog or two by people who had. One reviewer acknowledged that he had based an early review on nothing more than a publisher's description, a video by Bell, and a few chapters of the book^{2}. It's risky business to criticize a book one hasn't read. But more on that later.

Second, there was a heatedness about the responses that gave

away, I think, either simply a strong reaction against universalism, or a strong reaction against Bell because of his views before the book was published, or both. The name "Rob Bell" quickly draws an "ooh, boy" response from some Christians (okay, a lot of Christians), and the charge of universalism sets the keyboards clicking. Bell is a lightning rod for controversy. Some would say he brings it on himself. Even though he says he isn't a universalist, people are saying he must be on the basis of his views. That remains to be seen for me because I haven't read the book yet. In fact, I haven't heard much from him at all. Most of what I know about him I've gotten second-hand. Or third. Or fourth.

After glancing at a number of blogs about Bell's book, I turned back to Martin Bashir's interview with him. To be quite honest, I was impressed, but not in the positive sense. It wasn't a good interview. Bloggers talked about how Bashir really nailed Bell. Someone said Bashir was tough on Bell because he got a free ride in other interviews. He wanted to get the truth. Bashir himself made that claim in an interview with Paul Edwards.[{3}](#) One writer said Bell was "gutted" by Bashir. Another said Bashir made Bell squirm. Still another said Bashir knows more about Christianity than Bell does.

Bloggers were really annoyed at how hard it is to pin Bell down on his beliefs. Were they annoyed? Or were they, in fact, pleased?

That's a strange question, isn't it? Why would people be pleased? What I'm going to say next does not by any means apply to everyone who has criticized Bell for his views or for his manner in interviews. I've heard and read snippets of reviews that stayed on point and kept the fire in check. But I also saw, as I've seen plenty of times in my years of doing apologetics, what looked like real excitement at the opportunity to light into someone for his false views. Just the possibility of heresy brought out the best (or worst) in heresy hunters. Apologists are attuned to ideas that don't

accord with Christianity, and, unfortunately, sometimes an opportunity to do battle outruns good sense and common courtesy.

It could be that someone reading this right now will have read *Love Wins* and is wondering, because of the direction of this article, whether I am defending Bell in his (purported) universalism. I am not. I reject universalism. Probe rejects universalism. My concern here is the way the whole issue has been dealt with by the Christian community.

As I noted above, Bell himself has denied being a universalist. Well, that's rather inconvenient, isn't it? Some have responded by saying things like, If it smells like a dog and looks like a dog and barks like a dog, it's a dog. And after reading Bell's book, I might find myself agreeing that he sure sounds like a universalist. But there's something that can be done to find out for sure (or get closer to the truth). One could simply ask him his understanding of universalism! That wasn't done in the Bashir interview. The interviewer passed up a great opportunity to guide the interview in a more fruitful direction when he said nothing to Bell's brief comment about human free will. Free will is a problem for universalists. If Mr. Bashir had asked him about that, the interview might have been more interesting and fruitful.

The point of this article is no more to attack Mr. Bashir's interview than it is to examine Bell's beliefs. What I want to talk about is how we react in situations such as these. What good is it to pass around second- and third-hand reports about something this important, especially when others have already done it? Are we afraid that the rest of the Christian world will be buffaloed by a smooth-talking pastor and dragged into the depths of heresy if we don't alert them *right now*? Or do we just like the sounds of our own voices?

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respond to issues such as these.

What I want to do is list some principles I think are important as we face opportunities to publicly critique other people's views—principles that are especially appropriate for Christians critiquing Christians. Before doing that, I should answer the question, what's wrong with quick and sharp corrections? I've already given some hints by pointing at some responses I think have been off the mark. Let me be more specific.

First, there is the possibility of getting the person wrong and spreading slanderous accusations. There is no room for that anywhere, but especially in the Church. In-church discussions are rarely kept there anymore; it's all out there on the Web for everyone to see. We dishonor each other and our Lord when we carry on these fights in public, and we make it worse when we get it wrong.

Second, we work against our own goal of helping people learn to discern when we show a lack of discernment ourselves, when the example we give is shoot first and ask questions later.

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I propose these few principles of critiquing others' views for your consideration. These, of course, apply to all people. But here I'm primarily thinking about Christians responding to Christians:

First, don't be hasty. If real heresy is afoot, a delay of a week or so in raising the alarm can't hurt. On the other hand, having to apologize for getting something wrong can be rather painful.

Second, beware of jumping on the bandwagon. When we were kids playing football, we loved nothing more than to pile on

the guy who got tackled. It was lots of fun (until I was the one on the bottom!). Piling on in the present context can actually work to the benefit of the person being criticized, because the piling on can evoke sympathy in people, *especially* his own followers.

Third, know the person's position. Know the person's position. May I say it yet again? Know the person's position! Let me expand on this.

For one thing, nothing makes an apologist look worse than waxing eloquently and passionately against something only to find out he misunderstood what the other person said or thought. This brings to mind the late Gilda Radner's character Emily Litella on *Saturday Night Live* who would go on and on about something and then be told she'd misunderstood. "Never mind," she'd say. Getting it right may still not get you a hearing, but getting it wrong definitely won't.

To help get it right, don't rely exclusively on others' knowledge of the matter and their critiques. We don't all have the luxury of time to read a lot of books and articles and we may not have the expertise to rightly evaluate a certain position. We all rely to some extent on authorities. But if we do that all the time, we'll be getting a lot of one-sided understandings. When apologists go after other people's views, we usually don't spend a lot of time on the parts with which we agree! So you could be hearing only part of what the person actually thinks, and that part by itself could be misleading.

Another principle for getting it right is, don't key in on buzz words to the exclusion of explanations. This happened at least to some extent, I think, with Rob Bell. People called him a universalist, noted that universalism was denounced as a heresy way back in the sixth century, and then denounced him. By the time you read this, I may have read Bell's book and decided that, indeed, he is a universalist despite his protests to the contrary. But in the process, I hope I will

have a greater understanding of what universalism is and why people believe it.

For example, I'm especially interested in seeing how universalists work out the tension between the great love of God poured out in the supreme sacrifice of his Son (which is sufficient for all) and the freedom to choose on the part of people who don't want what Jesus offers. Are people free to reject God? If so, how can it be that everyone will be saved? These two things—the love of God and human free will—seem to come into conflict. To pursue that conflict could result in very fruitful conversation. Just keying in on the word universalism and lashing out would prevent the development of my own understanding.

A second problem with focusing on the buzz word without further developing it is that one would not be able to help other people think through it who are confused about the issue and need more than just a label and summary dismissal.

One last point about getting it right: everyone deserves the respect that is shown in getting their views correct. You and I would like people to treat us that way, and we should do the same for others.

So don't be hasty; don't jump on the bandwagon; and get the person's position right. One more:

Fourth, beware of reading in bad motives. Some bloggers said that Bell was deliberately evasive. Martin Bashir suggested that it would be bad for Bell's popularity (and for the sale of his book) to give straight answers (or to be "categorical"). What's the point of that? Maybe he's right. But maybe he's very wrong. It does absolutely nothing to advance the discussion of the ideas being propounded to engage in such speculation. Personal motivations can be discussed, but we'd better be very sure of ourselves before discussing them (and have very good reasons for doing so).

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Bashing Rob Bell: On Offering a Responsible Critique

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Those are sexy worldview glasses you've got there.

Feb. 3, 2011

E's email is a response to the post "[Glee-tastic!](#)"

Ms. McKenzie

Don't think Glee's overt sexuality has no effect on you. It is shaping you episode by episode. You are not immune.

Hi E,

Thanks for writing. I appreciate where you're coming from. Of course you're right. Whatever I watch shapes me. The question is, am I simply resigned to being shaped passively? Or do I have the option to take a more active role? I want you to know that I do not underestimate the power of our culture to shape us. That's why I work at a worldview ministry. Worldview goes a long way. The healthy view of sex I have intentionally pursued through study and prayer and practice and fellowship makes the nonsense often shown on screen unattractive, uninteresting, and particularly sophomoric. (Speaking of a holistic biblical worldview on sex, let me recommend Lauren Winner's excellent book, [Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity](#)). Now, that being said, that does not mean that I am immune. I have to be careful (again: prayer, study, fellowship/community, repentance).

I also understand that not everyone has the same level of freedom to interact with various aspects of our unbelieving society. Everyone is different. There are certain things which are particularly spiritually unsafe for me—I know it in my

guts and bones; I just can't go there. But I also know that doesn't mean it's as dangerous for others as it is for me, and I don't begrudge others their freedom. Especially since it's so important to engage. Personal conviction derives from the way God has uniquely **created** us as individuals and how our singular personality and wiring is affected by the **Fall** – our particular tendencies, weaknesses, addictions, our circumstances, our personal history. The Apostle Paul calls us “ministers of reconciliation,” those who bring back together what has been separated, which Romans tells us is people and all of creation, the combination of the two inevitably including what people create. The Church has, since its inception, chosen to reconcile, or **redeem** culture, generally, in five different ways (for more on this, see our article, [“Christians and Culture”](#)). And that's good. Diversity is good. Through it we better image God in all his vastness. Creation. Fall. Redemption. That is the framework we have for understanding the world; and because the Bible is true, it's also the most accurate understanding of the world. However, take out any part—creation, fall, redemption—and our vision is blurred.



Anyone who believes he or she is safe from the all the various temptations available in film is a fool. My colleague Todd wisely notes and advises, “Exercising rampant Christian freedom does not necessarily mean one is a strong Christian [referring to 1 Cor 8]. It could indicate that one is too weak to control one's passions and is hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother.” If we choose to watch TV or movies at all, we must approach them through a “framework of moderation,” to use Todd's phrase, that addresses *our*

particular weaknesses, for we are all of us the weaker brother somewhere. “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments” (Ps 119:66).

There is a difference between conviction and legalism. One of those differences is the legalistic compulsion to impose one’s personal convictions on others. It is possible to abstain from certain types of movies and shows, or even all movies and television, in a genuinely free way. I greatly admire my friends who abstain; who don’t even have a TV. Together we add to the richness of each others’ lives by bringing perspective to one another about who God is and how we relate to him. Together we present to the world a more complete picture. It is the diversity of the Body that most beautifully represents Christ to the world. It is vital to our Christian calling to live as much as we can in the tension between the pulls of legalism and libertinism. The ebb and flow of this kind of living is part of what it means to live the full, rich, abundant life of Christ.

With affection in our Lord Jesus,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/02/03/those-are-sexy-worldview-glasses-youve-got-there/

Tron Legacy: A 21st Century Frankenstein

[Editor’s Note: Movie spoilers ahead!]

A culture, like the human body, gives warning signs when it feels sick. If an infection enters the body, fever breaks out.

This serves as a demand for treatment. Science fiction has served this purpose in modern culture since the first sci-fi novel, *Frankenstein*, appeared in 1818. A well-intended scientist creates new life that could impart immortality to all, only to immediately cast it aside. However, being an emotional creature, Frankenstein's creation will not be dismissed so easily and demands that his maker take responsibility and introduce him to the human community. Put very simply, all Frankenstein's Monster asked of his creator was to be loved! In the absence of love and acceptance the creature wreaks a terrible revenge and destroys his creator.

The story is so well-tread in popular culture that it provides a guiding motif for most sci-fi stories; thus it serves as a prophetic warning to all technological innovation. In literature, folklore and the movies, a monster means WARNING! "Victor's monster, then, which brings about his death, is a warning to us all. Monster derives from the Latin *monere*, to warn." {1} Science fiction acts as the Socratic gadfly of scientific advance. "From its very birth . . . modern science fiction has functioned as a critic of the scientific enterprise . . . [It] both educates the general public in science and advises the scientists as to the appropriate projected goals of science . . . [In] the context of explosive technological advance and 'future shock,' science fiction is the only literature that seriously attempts to explore the social consequences of scientific innovation." {2} Theologian Elaine Graham notes that the Greek word for monster is *teras*, which means something both abhorrent and attractive. The monster is pure paradox and incarnates a contradictory state of existence. "It is both a sight of wonder—as divine portent—and loathing, as evidence of heinous sin." {3} Awful and "aweful," the monster embodies a liminal {4} being caught between two worlds. It represents the ambivalence of our creations. "Monsters embody fearful warnings of moral transgression . . . [they] herald new possibilities . . . the otherness of possible worlds, or possible versions of

ourselves, not yet realized.”^{5} This is not unlike ancient maps that demarcate unexplored territory with the warning: “HERE BE MONSTERS!” So our popular fictional monsters beckon us to heed their cries to take care for what we create.

The film *Tron Legacy* (2010, directed by Joseph Kosinski) continues this theme for the next generation. The movie is so visually spectacular in 3-D that the audience may easily forget its prophetic warning in a clear case where the medium threatens to overpower the message. As a visual spectacle *Tron Legacy* transforms the original *Tron* (1982, Steven Lisberger) from a cult movie following filmed in animation and live-action into a magnificent film that is also an amusement park ride.

The story follows Sam Flynn (Garret Hedlund) a disinterested majority share holder in Encom, a giant computer software company, as he pulls pranks on the board. Sam responds to a mysterious page sent from his father’s old arcade haunt and stumbles upon a teleport machine and is transported into *The Grid*.

Sam’s father, Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges), was a radical who believed quantum teleportation represents the “digital frontier.” Inside the computer, humanity can alter itself to create the perfect world. “In there is a new world! In there is our future! In there is our destiny!” Flynn emphatically states in a public address. He wants to reshape the human condition through digital manipulation. Flynn, Sr. discovers a serendipitous miracle in the process of creating utopia: a new life form bursts into existence through spontaneous generation; he calls them “isomorphic algorithms” (ISO’s). These self-forming programs hold the potential for solving all the mysteries of science, religion and medicine. They could end all disease and would be Flynn’s gift to the world! However, Flynn’s own created program CLU (Codified Likeness Utility)–designed to create perfection in *The Grid*–destroys the ISO’s in a coup because they threaten their shared vision

for creating perfection within The Grid. This traps Flynn in the digital world with the last surviving ISO, Quorra (Olivia Wilde), forcing them into hiding.

CLU (pronounced "clue"; Jeff Bridges playing his own clone) traps Sam in a vicious gladiatorial game—that he has stacked to be impossibly difficult, despite Sam's skill and determination—in an effort to lure Flynn Sr. from hiding. Quorra rescues Sam and brings him to his father. Flynn Sr. has been languishing all these years because he believes that his only viable option is to remain in his Zen Buddhist retreat. When Sam asks his father to fight CLU in order to escape with him back to the real world, his response is "We do nothing." The elder Flynn hopes against hope for the help of Tron, a warrior program designed to resist assimilation; but we discover that even Tron has been co-opted by CLU. The "Son of Flynn," as programs call Sam, botches an escape attempt, triggering a surprise rescue by Flynn Sr. and Quorra, who then seize the opportunity to exit through the rapidly closing window on the portal back to the actual world. Unfortunately, a Program steals Flynn Sr.'s memory disc in the process, giving CLU complete control over the entire Grid. Using his newfound power, CLU raises an army ready to escape the digital world and enter the real one. "Out there is a new world! Out there is our victory! Out there is our destiny!" CLU proclaims to his troops in Hitlerian Nuremburg Rally style.

Sam and Quorra escape dramatically through the open portal with the help of Tron, who has finally decided that he fights for the Users (the people who write the Programs). In a dramatic climax, Flynn reintegrates with CLU, destroying both of them.

The movie recapitulates the Frankenstein-esque fear of technology turning on its creator. CLU represents the dark *doppelgänger*[\[6\]](#), or alter ego, of Kevin Flynn in his youthful days when he believed perfection was an attainable goal.

Biblical allusions emerge, as well. CLU demonstrates a Luciferian jealousy when Flynn discovers the ISO's and seeks their destruction to spite his creator's love for them. Trinitarian imagery abounds throughout the movie, especially in the continual triangular juxtaposition of Flynn the Creator, Son of Flynn and Quorra who represents new life and remains the heart and soul of the movie through her innocence. In one scene, Flynn resides in the background with a glowing halo over his head as Sam and Quorra sit adjacent to each other discussing the beauty of a sunrise, forming a perfect triangle in the center of the screen. This symbolism reminds us that humanity creates the digital world, much the same as the Creator did the real one, and this co-creation can just as easily turn on us. The human condition is one of rebellion against creation. CLU's programmed perfectionism seeks eradication of all that is other than itself including the reclusive creator Flynn and plans to extend that stultifying perfection to the non-digital world.

Flynn's problem, like that of Victor Frankenstein, is that he no longer cares for CLU, but runs away and hides from his darker self. He rejects his creation and does not seek to reintegrate him into the society into which he has been "born," just as Victor Frankenstein disavows his creation. Technology critic Langdon Winner gives us an excellent explanation of the *Frankenstein / Tron* analogy, relating it to our spiritual reality. Winner argues that we fail to take sufficient care as to the consequences of our creations or how these innovations may change our lives negatively, and then we act shocked when they return to us as demonic powers instead of blessings. "Victor Frankenstein [Kevin Flynn] is a person who discovers, but refuses to ponder, the implications of his discovery. He is a man who creates something new in the world and then pours all his energy into an effort to forget. His invention is incredibly powerful and represents a quantum jump in the performance capability of a certain kind of technology. Yet he sends it out into the world with no real concern for

how best to include it in the human community. . . . He then looks on in surprise as it returns to him as an autonomous force, with a structure of its own, with demands upon which it insists absolutely. Provided with no plan for its existence, the technological creation enforces a plan upon its creator.”[\[7\]](#)

Sam emerges back into the real world with Quorra a changed man, refusing his father’s Zen retreat and ready to assert responsibility for his company by taking it back from greedy executives. *Tron Legacy* warns of the dangers of the digital frontier including cells phones, online dating and WiFi. Only through our care to assert responsibility for our technology through ethical control will it bring positive change to the human condition. But the movie also offers hope in the astounding potential digital technology offers through Sam’s transformation coupled with Quorra’s ability. The movie is a welcome tonic to a perfectionist and paranoid age obsessed with an elusive ideal of perfection. Flynn Sr. states, “Perfection is not knowable, but right in front of us all the time.” The movie proclaims that utopia, or human happiness, is not an ideal such as a computer program, but is found in our loved ones who are right in front of us.

Notes

[1.](#) Eric S. Rabkin, “Imagination and Survival: The Case of Fantastic Literature” in Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner, eds. *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts* (Lexington, KY: ICUS, 1999), 304.

[2.](#) Joseph D. Miller, “The ‘Novel’ Novel: A Sociobiological Analysis of the Novelty Drive As Expressed in Science Fiction” in Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner, eds. *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts* (Lexington, KY: ICUS, 1999), 326.

[3.](#) Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human:*

Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 53.

[4.](#) According to Encarta Dictionary: English (North America) accessed via Microsoft Word, “liminal” [liminl] means: “belonging to the point of conscious awareness below which something cannot be experienced or felt.”

[5.](#) Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* 53, 54.

[6.](#) Encarta Dictionary: “dop·pel·gang·er [dɒp(ə)lgæŋər]: 1. someone who looks like someone else; 2. spirit that looks like someone alive; 3. a spirit that some people believe looks like someone who is alive.

[7.](#) Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 313.

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Glee-wind: Grilled Cheesus

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Episode background: Major character Finn Hudson accidentally burns his grilled cheese sandwich, imprinting one side of it with the face of Jesus Christ. Finn takes this as a sign to take his nominal Christianity more seriously, irony intended by the writers it seems as Finn begins to pray to his sandwich which he now refers to as Grilled Cheesus. Every trivial and selfish thing Finn asks of Grilled Cheesus comes to pass; meanwhile, Finn’s Glee Club friend Kurt might be losing his father to heart disease – it doesn’t dawn on Finn to pray for

Kurt or his father; instead he prays that he might be quarterback again.

Most of the Glee kids turn to their faith in trying to deal with the news of Kurt's father and more poignantly, the immense pain of their friend. Kurt refuses to be comforted with his friends' prayers or anything which derives from religious faith, which he considers ridiculous, irrelevant, and ignorant.

So... Grilled Cheesus the sacred sandwich very well may be the most sacrilegious (and hilarious) thing since [Monty Python](#). But the episode as a whole really brought some very important spiritual issues to the table. Issues like: It's okay to publicly deny faith but not proclaim it. Conundrums like: You can't prove God doesn't exist and you can't prove he does. Problems like Hell; questions like: Why does it sometimes seem God answers prayers about winning football games but not about real human pain and suffering. It also highlights the fact that, for many, intellectual objections toward, and knee-jerk reactions against, religion are often on some level a shield protecting deeply painful, deeply real experiences: Sue's inability to pray hard enough to help her "handicapable" sister, Kurt's being rejected and marginalized and bullied by those who should love him most. Sure, both Sue and Kurt misunderstand certain aspects of God's nature and the way he works in the world. But so what? That can't really be addressed until we walk with them in their pain, like Mercedes does. Mercedes didn't give up on loving Kurt even after he rejected her and ridiculed her religion out of the abyss of his pain. She wasn't pushy. She just loved him. She "had [him] at 'fabulous hat'."

This episode seems to reject Sue's wrong, but widely held, understanding of separation of Church and State. The episode seems to reject Kurt's aggressive atheism (so at least it's equal opportunity religious tolerance), growing him from this position to one that's more open – to others' spirituality and

how that affects the way they inevitably relate to him if nothing else. “Grilled Cheesus” rejects the [moralistic therapeutic deism](#) rampant among Christian teens (and adults); and through Emma’s talk with Finn it also rejects over-spiritualizing everything that happens. The episode affirms the reality of religious doubt and uncertainty and the often person-relative struggles of everyone’s own spiritual journeying, which we should affirm. It affirms religious pluralism, which we reject. (See Bethany Keeley-Jonker’s post at ThinkingChristian.com which makes [this](#) important point about Mercedes’s pluralism.)

There’s much, much more to dig out and explore in this episode, which isn’t uncommon for *Glee*. And there are multiple possible interpretations among all that lies beneath, and that isn’t uncommon for *Glee* either; things are often complicated and ambiguous. [You can’t judge Glee by a single episode](#), or by what’s on the surface. It’s a project where characters and ideas are allowed to grow and develop in [real-life messiness](#).

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reneamac.com/2010/10/16/glee-wind-grilled-cheesus/