

Quotes or Misquotes:
**An Analysis of Rob Bell's Use of the Church Fathers in
His Book, *Love Wins***

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PURPOSE

This paper will attempt to address some of Rob Bell's historical fallacies regarding his book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person who Ever Lived*. This is not an exhaustive study of church history, patristic doctrine or the study of Universalism. It is an attempt by a pastor-teacher to make sense out of the assertions made by Rob Bell regarding certain early church leaders.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A few weeks ago I happened to be flipping through the television channels and came across a movie that caught my eye. A gentleman half dressed was pointing a gun at a man named Dr. Crowe (played by Bruce Willis). The gentleman was upset. He was upset because when he was a child, Dr. Crowe was not able to help him resolve his psychological issues. After the man's tirade, he shot Crowe and then shot himself.

Several months later, Crowe was attempting to help another kid. His name was Cole. He really wanted to help Cole because Cole reminded him of the gentleman that had shot him six months earlier. After some time, Cole opened up and told Crowe his problem or secret. "I see dead people," said Cole. Crowe asks "Where?" Cole says, "Everywhere. But they don't see each other and they don't know that they are dead."

Eventually, Crowe helps Cole with his problem. The dead people needed Cole's help. They needed to do a good deed before they could move on to the next life.

It is shortly after this revelation that Dr. Crowe realizes that he is actually dead.

Rob Bell's book is as fanciful as this movie. He suggests that after death people will have an opportunity to accept God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. He suggests that there may be another chance. He suggests that there will probably be a time of punishment, then restoration. Everything and everybody will be reconciled to God. This Universalist view comes from the Greek word, *apokatastasis* (restoration).

Bell draws upon historical figures of the past to try and justify his position. This is where we will begin our evaluation of Mr. Bell's historical assertions.

For this paper, I will address each church father listed on pages 107 and 108 of Bell's book. It would be easier for me to address these church fathers in the order in which they lived. However, since Mr. Bell listed Martin Luther first, I will address each individual in the order in which he lists them.

MARTIN LUTHER

On pages 105 and 106 Rob Bell states the following.

Although we're only scratching the surface of this perspective—the one that says we get this life and only this life to believe in Jesus—it is safe to say that this perspective is widely held and passionately defended by many in our world today.

Others hold this perspective (that there is this lifetime and only this lifetime in which we all choose one of two possible futures), but they suggest a possibility involving the image of God in each of us. We can nurture and cultivate this divine image, or we can ignore, deny, and strife it. If we can do this now, becoming less and less humane in our treatment of ourselves and others, what would happen if this went on unchecked for years and years? Would a person's humanity just ebb away eventually? Could the divine image be extinguished in a person, given enough time, some people could eventually move into a new state, one in which they were in essence "formerly human" or "posthuman" or even "ex-human?"

An interesting question.

And then there are others who can live with two destinations, two realities after death, but insist that there must be some kind of "second chance" for those who don't believe in Jesus in this lifetime. In a letter Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, wrote to Hans von Rechenberg in 1522 about the possibility that people could turn to God after death, asking: "Who would doubt God's ability to do that?"

Again, a good question.

And so space is created in this "who would doubt God's ability to do that?" perspective for all kinds of people—fifteen-year-old atheists, people— from other religions, and people who rejected Jesus because the only Jesus they ever saw was an oppressive figure who did anything but show God's love.¹

It is here that Bell implies that Martin Luther held the view that there is a possibility that men will have a second chance to accept God's forgiveness in the next life. He implies that Luther is one who can live with the possibilities of these two destinations.

As in several of Mr. Bell's quotes, he fails to give accurate references. Fortunately, I was able to locate the source of Luther's quote in Luther's *Works*, volume 43, pages 53-54.²

¹Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. P. 105-106.

²*Luther's Works*, 43, ed. and trans. G. Wienke and H. T. Lehmann [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968], 53-54; WA 10.ii, 324.25-325.11.

As pastors we know the importance of proper hermeneutics. It is very easy to take a verse out of context and make it mean whatever you want it to mean. Those of us in the theological world call it isogesis rather than exegesis. In this instance, Bell does a wonderful job of isogesis. He has taken a quote by Martin Luther and made it say something for which Martin Luther never intended it to mean.

In his quote, Luther is responding to Hans von Rechenberg. It is von Rechenberg who is wondering if one can turn to God after death. Luther responds in the following manner.

If God were to save anyone without faith, he would be acting contrary to his own words and would give himself the lie; yes, he would deny himself. And that is impossible for, as St. Paul declares, God cannot deny himself [II Tim. 2:13]. It is as impossible for God to save without faith as it is impossible for divine truth to lie. That is clear, obvious, and easily understood, no matter how reluctant the old wineskin is to hold this wine—yes, is unable to hold and contain it.

It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. *Who would doubt God's ability to do that?* No one, however, can prove that he does do this. For all that we read is that he has already raised people from the dead and thus granted them faith. But whether he gives faith or not, it is impossible for anyone to be saved without faith. Otherwise every sermon, the gospel, and faith would be vain, false, and deceptive, since the entire gospel makes faith necessary.³

The key to Luther's overall statement is not what Mr. Bell has chosen to highlight, but what Luther states after the sentence that Bell quotes. Luther states that "No one, however, can prove that he does do this."

It is clear that Luther does not believe that God gives people a second chance after death. As far as Luther is concerned it cannot be proven that God does such a thing.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Please see Carl Trueman's (Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary) blog for March 2011, for a more detailed and excellent explanation of Luther's quote. Also, I am indebted to his blog for directing me to Luther's quote. <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/easy-virtues-and-cruel-mistresses.php>

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND ORIGEN

Bell continues to cite ancient church fathers to justify his theological position. However he is extremely vague with regard to his sources. Actually, he does not cite any sources. He merely, states the following.

And so, beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will ultimately restore everything and everybody, because Jesus says in Matthew 19 that there will be a “renewal of all things,” and Paul says in Colossians 1 that through Christ “God was please to... reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

In the third century the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen affirmed God’s reconciliation with all people.⁵

It is at this point that I will pause to address Bell’s assertions regarding these two church fathers. Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens) became the head of the Catechetical school of Alexandria in A.D. 190. According to Woolley, [*Clement*] “took an optimistic view of the future of all men, but knowledge would be rewarded in the world to come.”⁶ Origen (A.D. 185-254) expanded on this belief. Origen believed that, “men gradually free themselves from the earthly by meditation, by abstinence, by the vision of God. A purging fire may be needed in the process. Although this world is neither the first nor the last of a series, there will ultimately come the restoration of all things. Flesh, matter, will disappear, spirit only will remain, and God will be all in all.”⁷

According to both Clement and Origen the process of purification, begun in the life of the sinner on earth, is continued after death. Origen teaches that at death the good enter paradise or a place where they receive further education, and the wicked experience the fire of judgment which, however, is not to be regarded as a permanent punishment, but as a means of purification. Clement asserts that the heathen have an opportunity to repent in Hades and that their probation does not end until the Day of Judgment, while Origen maintains that God’s work of redemption will not cease until all things are restored to their pristine beauty. The restoration of all things will even include Satan and his demons.⁸

A casual reading of *Love Wins* by a novice, would suggest that the teaching of these Alexandrian church fathers was fully accepted by the church. Without judging, Mr. Bell’s motives, this seems to be what he

⁵ Bell, p.107.

⁶ Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids; 1984, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Berkhof, Louis. *The History of Christian Doctrines*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann, 1937, p. 75.

is counting on. However, Clement of Alexandria and Origen's theology of Universalism, along with other tenants of their theology, was rejected and declared heretical⁹ at the fifth ecumenical council in A.D. 553.¹⁰

In fact, in A.D. 543, the Roman emperor Justinian, anathematized the doctrine of deliverance from hell.¹¹ He stated in his *Anathematismos of the Emperor Justinian Against Origen*, Article XI, "If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration (apokatastasis) will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema."¹²

It is clear that Clement and Origen's views were ultimately rejected by the Orthodox Church. The problem is that Origen's views were accepted (to one extent or another) by some of the early church fathers prior to their whole sale rejection in A.D. 553.

Bell cites two adherents of Origen's views, and combines them with three other non-adherents, and presents them "all" as proponents of Universalism.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

After stating that Clement of Alexandria and Origen affirmed Universalism, Bell states on page 107,

"In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa and Eusebius believed this as well."¹³

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian fathers, was appointed the bishop of Nyssa in A.D. 372 and again in A.D. 381. Gregory was greatly influenced by the writings of Origen. According to Elwell, Gregory fully accepted the Universalist belief in the salvation of all things.¹⁴ However Hosea Ballou (an actual Universalist), in his book, *Ancient History of Universalism*, is not sure where Gregory of Nyssa stood on this doctrine.

⁹ The actual translated article XIV states, "IF anyone shall say that all reasonable beings will one day be united in one, when the hypostases as well as the numbers and the bodies shall have disappeared, and that the knowledge of the world to come will carry with it the ruin of the worlds, and the rejection of bodies as also the abolition of [all] names, and that there shall be finally an identity of the gnosis and of the hypostasis; moreover, that in this pretended apokatastasis, spirits only will continue to exist, as it was in the reigned pre-existence: let him be anathema."

¹⁰ Elwell, p. 1128.

¹¹ MacDonald, Gregory. *The Evangelical Universalist*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006, p. 174.

¹² <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/const2.html>

¹³ Bell, p.107.

¹⁴ Elwell, p. 487.

Regarding Gregory, Ballou states,

We cannot pronounce with confidence, as his language is not uniform, nor always reconcilable. He repeatedly states, at considerable length, that those who, after baptism, indulge in sins, however heinous, and die under the guilt of them, are to be purified in the fire of general judgment; distinguishing them, however, from such as have never professed Christianity. Yet, at another time... asserts that their future torments "will have no end," and that "there is no release, no way to flee from them after death. Now is the time in which we are allowed to escape them."¹⁵

Most recently, scholars have viewed Gregory of Nyssa as a Universalist at heart citing his work, *Dialogue with Macrina*.¹⁶ Macrina, Gregory's older sister, is on her deathbed and Gregory is recounting his previous dialogue with her. Gregory states,

"Then," I said, "it seems to me in light of the foregoing discussion that the divine judgment does not bring punishment upon sinners but rather, as the discourse has demonstrated, it only effects the separation of the good from evil and direction toward the fellowship of blessedness; but the tearing in pieces of what has grown together brings pain for the one being torn apart."

[*Macrina replies*] "So... that is my reasoned opinion, and moreover that the measure of suffering is the quantity of evil in each person; for it is not likely that the one who has fallen into moderate evils will be distressed on an equal basis in the purification of bad habits, but rather that the painful flame will be kindled either to a greater or lesser degree according to the amount of matter, as long as it exists."¹⁷

Although Gregory vigorously defended the Nicene cause¹⁸ it appears that he was heavily influenced by Origen's view of limited punishment.

¹⁵ Ballou, Hosea, *Ancient History of Universalism*. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1885, p.154-155.

¹⁶ Harmon, Steven R. *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003, p.88.

¹⁷ Ibid. This is a partial quote of what is listed in Harmon's book.

¹⁸ Elwell, p. 487.

EUSEBIUS

Eusebius was the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine in A.D. 315. He was considered the father of Church History.¹⁹

Eusebius was very well acquainted with the life of Origen. He had collected a hundred of Origen's letters. Together with Pamphilus he wrote an Apology (Defense) of Origen (six books), which contained not only a detailed account of his life but an explanation of his theology and a defense of the charges brought against him by two bishops of Alexandria [*Peter and Methodius*]. Unfortunately, only the first book of this work is extant.²⁰

This Apology defended Origen as orthodox and presented him as a model Christian. In the process of defending Origen, Pamphilus [*and therefore Eusebius*] affirmed his denial of eternal punishment.²¹

From the extent of my research, it does appear that Eusebius denied eternal punishment. However, Eusebius is better known as an historian than a theologian. I am not sure he is the best person to defend such a controversial position. In the early church, Origen's doctrine was considered controversial and therefore rejected in A.D. 553 (*see previous section on Origen*).

So with regards to Gregory and Eusebius, I would agree with Bell. The writings of these two church fathers indicate that they had Universalist views and were heavily influence by Origen.

JEROME

Bell continues on page 108 of his book by stating,

In their day, Jerome claimed that "most people," Basil said the "mass of men," and Augustine acknowledged that "very many" believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God.²²

Bell is stating that Jerome, Basil and Augustine acknowledge that a large amount of people believe in Universalism. The problem is Bell does not cite his sources. Nor does he communicate the context of each of these abridged statements. What does "most people," "mass of men" and "very many" mean

¹⁹ Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. Volume II: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997, p.4.

²⁰ Deferrari, Roy J. *The Fathers of the Church: Eusebius Pamphili*. New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955, p.4 (footnote).

²¹ Trigg, Joseph Wilson. *Origen: The Bible & Philosophy in the Third-century Church*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983, p.247.

²² Bell, p. 108.

when it is pulled out of thin air? Earlier we saw that Bell took Luther's quote out of context. What makes us believe that these words were not taken out of context as well?

Bell seems to imply that these individuals viewed Universalism as the norm. He writes as if this was an accepted doctrine of the church during their time. He also implies that maybe they embraced it as well.

With regards to Jerome, he lived from A.D. 347 to 419. He was a biblical scholar and translator who aimed to introduce the best of Greek learning to Western Christianity. He is probably most well known for his translation of the Latin Vulgate.²³

It is true that Jerome was influenced by Origen's doctrine during a period of his life but he did not fully embrace it. He believed that the baptized [*the believer*] would have to go through a time of purification. However, Jerome clearly taught that "the punishment of the devils and of the impious, that is of those who have not come to the Faith, shall be eternal;" (See Petavius, *Theol. dogmat. De Angelis*, 111, 112.)²⁴

It is clear from this statement that eternal punishment was Jerome's view.

BASIL

Basil succeeded Eusebius as Bishop of Caesarea in A.D. 370. He is known as an eloquent defender of Nicaean Christianity.²⁵

The quote attributed²⁶ to Basil from where I believe Bell took the words "mass of men" is, "*The mass of men say that there is to be an end of punishment to those who are punished.*"²⁷ I was able to find this quote in an appendix of Gulley and Mulholland's book, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* but there was no reference or context associate with it.

A careful reading of this statement attributed to Basil does not suggest that Basil is an adherent of the doctrine of Universalism.²⁸

²³ Elwell, p.578.

²⁴ Herbermann, Charles G. *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constituion, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*. New York: The Encyclopedia Press Inc., vol.I, 1913, p.600.

²⁵ Elwell, p.128.

²⁶ I use the word "attributed" because I was not able to trace these quotes to original sources or reliable secondary sources. This does not mean that they are not available. It only means that I was not able to find them.

²⁷ Gulley, Philip and James Mulholland. *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2003, p. 217. It is located in Appendix 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Gulley and Mulholland state that Basil "did not hold the universalist position."

In fact, what Basil does ask in regards to sinners suffering in hell is this.

With what body shall it endure those in-terminable and unquenchable scourges, where the fire and the worm punishing deathlessly, and the dark and horrible abyss, and the bitter groans, and the vehement weeping and gnashing of teeth where the evils have no end.²⁹

Basil wants to know, what type of body will the sinner have to be able to endure unending suffering? This does not sound like the words of someone who thinks that punishment will end.

AUGUSTINE

Of the Church Fathers who are listed by Bell, I am surprised that he listed Augustine. Augustine of Hippo was perhaps antiquity's greatest theologian. He was the bishop of the monastery that he founded in Hippo, Africa in A.D. 395.³⁰

Bell wrote that Augustine acknowledged that "very many" believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God. The quote attributed³¹ to Augustine is, "There are very many who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments."³² I must admit that I was not able to track down this exact quote.³³ However, this quote does not appear to be an acceptance by Augustine of Universalism. In fact, it is known that Augustine "defended the doctrine of eternal conscious torment against what he calls 'certain tender hearts of our own religion.'"³⁴

Earlier I stated that I was not able to find Augustine's exact quote. However, I was able to find a quote from Augustine in his work, *City of God*, which contains a significant amount of the previous quote, but not the exact wording. For comparison sake, I will repeat the attributed quote of Augustine from which I believe Bell sourced. Then I will compare that with what Augustine wrote in his work, *City of God*.

Attributed Quote: "There are very many who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments."

City of God quote: "There are others, again, with whose opinions I have become acquainted in conversation, who, though they seem to reverence the holy scriptures, are yet of reprehensible life, and

²⁹ Hanson, J.W. *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church during Its First Five Hundred Years*. Boston, MA & Chicago, IL: Universalist Publishing House, 1899. p.234

³⁰ Elwell, p.105.

³¹ See footnote 25.

³² Gulley, p. 217.

³³ It is cited in Appendix 2 of Gulley and Mulholland but without original source.

³⁴ MacDonald, p.173.

who accordingly, in their own interest, attribute to God a still greater compassion towards men. For they acknowledge that it is truly predicted in the divine word that the wicked and unbelieving are worthy of punishment, but they assert that, when the judgment comes, mercy will prevail;" (Augustine, City of God, XXI, 18).³⁵

Augustine states that there are "others". He states that they "seem" to reverence the Holy Scriptures. But he also states that they are of "reprehensible life." This does not seem as though Augustine is embracing the Universalist doctrine or saying that it is widely accepted.

Elsewhere in his work Augustine states,

I must now, I see, enter the lists of amicable controversy with those tender-hearted Christians who decline to believe that any, or that all of those whom the infallibly just Judge may pronounce worthy of the punishment of hell, shall suffer eternally, and who suppose that they shall be delivered after a fixed term of punishment, longer or shorter according to the amount of each man's sin. In respect of this matter, Origen was even more indulgent; for he believed that even the devil himself and his angels, after suffering those more severe and prolonged pains which sins deserved, should be delivered from their torments, and associated with the holy angels. But the Church, not without reason, condemned him for this and other errors; (Augustine, City of God, XXI, 17).³⁶

Here Augustine acknowledges that there are some Christians who believe in limited punishment, but he is clear that they are in error right along with Origen. What is of interest to me with regards to this statement by Augustine is the time frame of his statement. Augustine completed this work in A.D. 426.³⁷ This was 127 years prior to the Fifth Ecumenical Council in A.D. 553 and yet Augustine states that the Church had already condemned Origen's doctrine.

Although Bell does not state directly that Augustine embraces the Universalist doctrine, he implies that Augustine acknowledged it or viewed it as an acceptable brand of Christianity. If Bell had done any serious research he would have known that this is just plain false!

³⁵ Schaff, Philip. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol.II. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993, p. 467.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, v.

OTHER HISTORICAL FIGURES

After the Fifth Ecumenical Council in A.D. 553 there were very few who seemed to hold to a Universalist view of salvation in the Western church. In the seventh century there was Maximus the Confessor (A.D. 580-662). In the ninth century there was John Scotus Eriugena (A.D. 810-877). In the 1400's there was the medieval mystic, Lady Julian of Norwich.³⁸ For the most part, the few individuals that can be traced (from the early church to Luther) who held this view have not been significant. For Bell to assert that such a view has been held as a central view of the church is disingenuous.

CONCLUSION

Rob Bell's use of ancient church Fathers to support his case for Universalism is extremely weak. Not only has he used quotes out of context, he has misrepresented the position of some these church fathers. Universalism had worked its way into portions of the early church. However, the church recognized it for what it was; an aberration. Even before the formal renunciation of the doctrine in A.D. 553, the church had begun to distance itself from the doctrine. The fifth ecumenical council only formalized what the church had already recognized; "Let everyone who holds to this doctrine be anathema."

³⁸ MacDonald, p.174.

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