

## ABSTRACT

An Examination of the Use of Scripture by Representative American Evangelical Christians to Understand the Eternal Destiny of Non-Christians

Alex Parker

Director: Dr. Blake B. Burleson, PhD

"Who goes to heaven?" For centuries, this question has been answered from the pulpit by evangelical Christian pastors. For evangelicals, the principle authority for seeking answers to this question, and for all questions in matters of faith, is the Bible. The Reverend Billy Graham's use of scripture is representative of many, perhaps most, evangelicals today. Yet new evangelical voices have emerged that use scripture to come to different conclusions. Two of these voices, the Reverends Rob Bell and Brian McLaren, have found a receptive evangelical audience. This thesis compares Graham's use of scripture, which leads him to an exclusivist eschatology with that of Bell and McLaren, which lead them to a universalistic eschatology. Historically rendered incompatible, this thesis demonstrates that while exclusivism and universalism are different in their eschatological conclusion; that each camp can learn something from the other.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF SENIOR THESIS:

---

Dr. Blake W. Burleson, Associate Dean for Undergraduate  
Students, College of Arts and Sciences

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

---

Dr. Andrew Wisely, Director

DATE:

---

AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF SCRIPTURE BY REPRESENTATIVE  
AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS TO UNDERSTAND THE ETERNAL  
DESTINY OF NON-CHRISTIANS

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

Alex Parker

Waco, Texas

May 2015

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	iii
Chapter 1: Pluralism As A Challenge To Mainstream Evangelical Views On The Eternal Destination Of Nonbelievers.....	1
Chapter 2: Billy Graham: An Example Of Typical Evangelical Use Of Scripture To Justify Exclusivism.....	8
Chapter 3: Rob Bell: An Example of A New Understanding of Scripture To Justify Philosophical Pluralism.....	16
Chapter 4: Brian McLaren: An Example of A New Understanding of Scripture To Justify Philosophical Pluralism.....	24
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	32
Chapter 6: Personal Reflection....	34
Bibliography.....	38

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and fiancée, who have been major sources of support throughout this entire process.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Pluralism as a Challenge to Mainstream Evangelical Views on the Eternal Destination of Nonbelievers

*Until the nineteenth century, almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment. Its advocates among theologians today must be fewer than ever before. The alternative interpretation of hell as annihilation seems to have prevailed even among many of the more conservative theologians. Among the less conservative, universal salvation, either as hope or as dogma, is now so widely accepted that many theologians assume it virtually without argument.<sup>1</sup>*

One of the central questions for all Christians in an increasingly pluralistic world is: Is Jesus the *only* way to salvation? Is an affirmative answer anything more than narrow-minded bigotry? Is a negative answer simply a “watered-down” Christianity? For two thousand years, Christian claims of exclusivism (i.e., Christ is the only way to salvation) were central to Christian self-understanding. Yet today in the western world with its emphasis on individual rights and respect for freedom of conscience, exclusivist claims by any one religion seem outmoded, even dangerous. All Christians, no matter their theological or denominational orientation, are being challenged by pluralism. This thesis explores this challenge by comparing and contrasting select Evangelicals' use of Scripture to support exclusivist and pluralistic theologies. The particular pluralistic

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Universalism: A Historical Survey* (1978), 47-54.

Evangelicals are Reverends Rob Bell and Brian McLaren and the Reverend Billy Graham serves as the traditional exclusivist Evangelical.

Donald Carson, author of *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, explores what pluralism means for Christianity in societies that value religious diversity. Carson describes three types of pluralism. *Empirical pluralism is the observant truth* that Americans live in a diverse society. America is a country of many languages, ethnicities, religions, and worldviews. In a “post-Christianity” America, there are more atheists and agnostics, New Agers, and Muslims than previously. The “privatization” of religion has resulted in an America that is more religiously diverse than ever before; thousands of religious groups exist in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

A second kind of pluralism, according to Carson, is *cherished pluralism*. *Cherished pluralism values plurality in a positive way*. Consider, for example, the goals of a typical college admissions office. Each incoming class needs to have diverse talents, interests, ethnicity, and backgrounds. Diversity is a treasured value in academia. This positive assessment of diversity can also be extended to the religious realm. The view that all religions are equally valuable is becoming more prevalent in America. Furthermore, many Americans are eclectic in their individual spiritual practices and religious beliefs. Today Americans believe everything a "little bit."<sup>3</sup> Many in America see this diverse landscape as a positive development.

Lastly, Carson describes *philosophical pluralism*. Empirical pluralism is factual, cherished pluralism values that fact, and philosophical pluralism provides the justification

---

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Challenge From Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel* (Deerfield, Illinois: Criswell Theological Review, 1993), 100-101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

for requiring it. *Philosophical pluralism argues that no single religion or worldview may claim an exclusive knowledge of the truth.* Philosophical pluralism denies that there are any absolutes and insists that all religions and worldviews be seen as equally valid. The notion of a particular claim being superior to another claim is rejected by philosophical pluralists. In this view, no religion may pronounce itself as ultimately true since a person's worldview is always a subjective opinion.<sup>4</sup>

Some Christians have become philosophical pluralists. John Hick, philosopher and Christian theologian, defends philosophical pluralism stating that true religion is like a grand mosaic. In his theological construct, no single religion is capable of teaching everything about God, but each religious perspective contributes to the whole picture. Hick writes, "Each of the great world faiths constitutes a perception of and a response to the ultimate divine reality which they all in their different ways affirm."<sup>5</sup> One may practice his or her own faith realizing that it is one of many true faiths and one of many paths to salvation. What a person believes is only relatively true and suggesting otherwise is considered arrogant and dangerous.<sup>6</sup> That is to say that no religious truth is absolute, all truth claims are considered relative. This view of truth is illustrated in the famous Jain parable of the blind men and the elephant in which each man felt a different part of the animal and described it in a different way. Each man thought he was describing the whole elephant but each man only had relative truth. What each reported about the elephant was true but only in a limited way.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103-105.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.



What does it mean for Christians to suggest that all religious truth is relative? And in particular what does it mean for Evangelical Christians? Does it diminish Christianity if one suggests that Christian truth claims are relative? Does the pluralist dismiss fundamental assertions of Christianity?

Pluralistic perspectives are growing amongst those that identify themselves as Evangelicals. A study done by James Hunter at the University of Virginia reveals that the majority of students at Christian colleges and seminaries doubt whether faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. There is a growing concern among Christians for those who have never heard the gospel and a hope that God will save everyone regardless of a personal relationship with Christ.<sup>7</sup> Many Evangelicals are adjusting beliefs that seem too restrictive. They ask: how can God condemn those who have never heard the Gospel? Perhaps God "saves" them in a different way than he "saves" Christians or, perhaps, He gives them a chance for salvation after they die? This sentiment may be expressed as follows: Jesus is the Savior of the world, but since not everyone in the world has the chance to hear the good news about Jesus, Christ's saving grace must be revealed through other religions. Therefore, Jesus saves through avenues in other religions. Though this theology is couched in exclusivist language (e.g., Christ is the only way), it represents a pluralist point-of-view (i.e., all pathways are viable).

This thesis focuses on how Evangelicals use Scripture to justify pluralistic theologies. Since the Reformation, the term "Evangelical" has been generally applied to Protestant churches because of their notion of "sola scriptura." All beliefs are based on

---

<sup>7</sup> James Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Evangelicalism has played a large part in American history. Historian Steven Miller suggests that Evangelicalism has had a lasting impact on how Americans conceive of the links between religion and politics.<sup>9</sup> In the twentieth century, Evangelicals had a significant impact on national elections beginning with President Ronald Reagan. Though still exerting influence nationally, it appears that contemporary Evangelical impact in the twenty-first century is expressed at the micro level, within local congregations. This is in part due to scandals that have occurred in the personal lives of Evangelical pastors.

Central to any understanding of American Evangelicalism is a commitment to Scripture as the final authority. Rather than turning to tradition which can at times be mistaken, rather than elevating reason as more than a tool for recognizing and affirming authority, and rather than trusting experience's narrow, subjective perspective, Evangelicals have sought to ground their theology in God's Word. Evangelicals recognize that Jesus himself accepted the authority of Scripture since he submitted himself to the Torah.<sup>10</sup>

Traditional exclusivism is still typical of some Evangelical points-of-view.

However, a new generation of Evangelical Christians is gaining popularity with their pluralist perspectives. Historically, Evangelicals have used Scripture to justify exclusivist theologies. The Reverend Billy Graham will serve as the example from the exclusivist camp. Graham is arguably the most famous American Christian in history. Ordained as a

---

<sup>8</sup> E.A. Livingstone, *Oxford: Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 207.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Steven P. 1977-, (Steven Patrick). 2014. *The age of evangelicalism: America's born-again years*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, Robert K. "Biblical authority and hermeneutics: the growing evangelical dialogue." *Southwestern Journal Of Theology* 34, no. 2 (March 1, 1992): 22-30. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed January 29, 2015).

Southern Baptist minister, he has celebrity status amongst conservative evangelical and other Protestant Christians. Graham was a pastor in Illinois before leaving to join *Youth for Christ*, an Evangelical missionary group that "witnessed" to returning servicemen and young people. In 1948, he became president of Northwestern Schools, a group of Christian schools in Minnesota. In 1952, Graham resigned from Northwestern Schools in order to devote his life to preaching. People soon identified Graham with unforgettable gospel sermons and he became a Christian superstar and televangelist. Many credited him with making Evangelism central to Evangelical concern. He is the author of over thirty books. One *Time* reporter suggested that, although people had varied opinions about him, he was, in fact, "the Pope of Protestant America."<sup>11</sup>

The Reverend Rob Bell is a bestselling author, international teacher, public speaker, and pastor. He attended Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary. Upon completing his education Bell founded Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan at age twenty-eight. Under his leadership, the church became one of the fastest growing churches in America. In January 2007 *The Church Report* magazine identified Bell as one of the "top ten most influential Christians in America." Then in 2011, *Time* recognized Bell as one of the 100 most influential people in America. He was also featured in a series of short films called *NOOMA* that offered spiritual reflection on individual life experiences. These films have been shown in a variety of church settings as an aid to studying the Bible. Bell has authored many notable books but his most well

---

<sup>11</sup> "Billy Graham." The Biography.com website, <http://www.biography.com/people/billy-graham-9317669>.

known and controversial book, *Love Wins* (2011), led to a "falling out" with his congregation at Mars Hill Bible Church.<sup>12</sup>

The Reverend Brian McLaren is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. A former college English teacher and pastor, he is an ecumenical global Christian leader. He attended the University of Maryland, graduating *summa cum laude*. After graduating from college, McLaren became a college English teacher for eight years. During that time he also helped found Cedar Ridge Community Church, an innovative, nondenominational church in the Baltimore-Washington region. Leaving higher education in 1986, he went on to become the founding pastor of the Cedar Ridge church, serving until 2006. During his tenure, Cedar Ridge became a leader among missional congregations. Missional churches focus solely on God's mission in the world, training people for discipleship and witness. However, McLaren is best known for his writing and speaking about postmodern Christian ministry, appearing in numerous national and international interviews and speaking venues. He has several best-selling books. Presently, McLaren teaches as a visiting scholar at seminaries. He also serves on a number of boards and is a founding member of Red Letter Christians; an organization that desires to counter the political influence of conservative Christians.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> "Rob Bell." Facebook. 2008. Accessed January 29, 2015.  
[https://www.facebook.com/therealrobbell/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/therealrobbell/info?tab=page_info).

<sup>13</sup> McLaren, Brian. "About Brian." Brian D. McLaren. 2003. Accessed January 29, 2015.  
<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/about-brian/>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Billy Graham: An Example of Typical Evangelical Use of Scripture to Justify

#### Exclusivism

*Billy Graham gave his typical invitation; unfortunately few people respond. He had been experiencing "good" results in his service up until this time, but the lack of response this night bothered him. Later, as he was being driven back to his hotel, he wondered what he could have done differently to encourage the decision he was asking people to make. "What happened? Why did so few come forward?" he wondered out loud. The driver of the car, who had been at the meeting, thought for a moment and then said simply, "You did not preach the Cross." Immediately Billy Graham fell under conviction. Why hadn't he seen it before? As soon as he got back to his hotel room, Billy fell to his knees and made a promise to God, "I'll never preach again without stressing the Cross."<sup>14</sup>*

Billy Graham represents the typical Evangelical understanding of the destination of non-Christians. Graham uses Scripture to make three major points to support an exclusivist point of view. The majority of his theological positions used in this thesis are extracted from scholars that have written about his sermons and some direct words from Graham himself. First, God does not send people to hell willingly. Second, Christ as Savior and Lord is the only path to salvation. Third, hell is a future reality in the next life that awaits all nonbelievers.

For his first argument, that God does not will individuals to damnation, Graham alludes to many biblical passages but especially to the Adam and Eve narrative in Genesis. He argues that God "must send" people to hell as a result of the sin of a literal Adam and Eve, writing:

---

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Drummond, *The Evangelist* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 35.

He wanted to save man. He wanted to free man from the curse of sin, but he could not break His word. His very nature would not allow Him to lie. He had stated that if Adam disobeyed His injunction he would die physically and spiritually and now that Adam had eaten the apple, God had to go through with is promise or be a liar. So death and sorrow and hell-fire became the lot of all men.<sup>15</sup>

For Graham, sin is a damnable, unpardonable offense against God for which humanity is fully responsible: "And that Adam, not the Devil or God, is to blame, and that all men must suffer for Adam's fall."<sup>16</sup> As a result of Adam's first sin, humans now possess original sin. Original sin is the state of sin in which humanity has been captive since "the Fall."<sup>17</sup>

In addition to Genesis, Graham relies heavily on Paul for his understanding that all of humanity is fallen because of Adam. For example, Paul writes in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."<sup>18</sup> In I Corinthians 15:21-22, Paul writes, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."<sup>19</sup> These two passages from Paul are amplified thousands of times in Graham's sermons.

---

<sup>15</sup> William McLoughlin Jr. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1960), 74.

<sup>16</sup> William McLoughlin Jr. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1960), 74.

<sup>17</sup> E.A. Livingstone, *Oxford: Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 426.

<sup>18</sup> Romans 5:12 NRSV.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 NRSV.

For Graham, although God must condemn the sinner to hell since God is just, God's punishment is actually a human choice. People "send themselves to hell" by refusing to accept God's mercy.<sup>20</sup> According to Graham, humans are absolutely free to choose heaven or hell. Hell was created for the Devil and his angels, not for humanity. God did not intend for any person to end up in hell and God has done everything within His power to keep people out.<sup>21</sup> The New Testament teaches, according to Graham, that people end up in hell by condemning themselves through their blindness, stubbornness, egotism, and love of sinful pleasure. These sins prevent eternal life with God.<sup>22</sup> Yet, God has provided a way for the repentant sinner. Graham often cites Revelation 3:20, which reads: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."<sup>23</sup> Another Scripture that he frequently cites is 2 Peter 3:9 which reads: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."<sup>24</sup>

Graham's second argument supported with Scripture is that Christ is the only pathway to salvation. According to Graham this injunction is obvious: "the Bible has no

---

<sup>20</sup> William McLoughlin Jr. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1960), 76.

<sup>21</sup> Joe E. Barnhart, *The Billy Graham Religion* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1972), 129.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Lowe, *Billy Graham Speaks: Insight from the World's Greatest Preacher* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1999), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Revelation 3:20 NRSV.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Peter 3:9 NRSV.

hidden purpose, it has no need for special interpretation. It has a single, clear, bold message for every living being."<sup>25</sup> The simple message for every living being is that the only solution for humanity's dilemma after the "fall of Adam" is for an innocent party to die physically and spiritually as a substitute before God.<sup>26</sup> For Graham,

"Man's only salvation from sin stands on a lonely, barren skull-shaped hill; a thief hangs on one cross, a murderer on another, and between them a man with a crown of thorns . . . [T]he blow that crucified Christ became the blow that opened the gates for man to become free."<sup>27</sup>

T. W. Wilson, an associate of Graham, said, "I have never heard him [Graham] compromise. He is committed to the *exclusiveness* of the Gospel."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the only remedy for the ills of the human race is personal faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> The biblical justification cited by Graham to support his understanding that Christ is the only pathway to salvation is found in the following passages: Acts 16:31, John 1:12, Romans 5:1, Acts, 4:12, and Ephesians 2:8-9.<sup>30</sup> Those that believe in Christ will be saved

---

<sup>25</sup> William McLoughlin Jr. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1960), 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis Drummond, *The Evangelist* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 41.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis Drummond, *The Evangelist* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 36. Italics added.

<sup>29</sup> William McLoughlin Jr. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1960), 76.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 16:31: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." John 1: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Romans 5: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Acts 4: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must



and have the ability to become children of God. The only way to achieve peace and salvation with God is through faith in Christ that is a gift of God. This is not something that humanity can achieve. Those that do not believe in Christ will not be saved and will not become children of God.

Additionally, Revelation also offers what Graham believes to be a description of every unbeliever's fate. Christ is the keeper of the book of life and only those that have affirmed him as the sole pathway to salvation have their names written in that book.

Revelation 20 reads:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.<sup>31</sup>

This is the fate of unbelievers unless they can answer one central question: "What did you do with Jesus?" Graham notes that one does not go to hell for drinking or speaking with profanities, one goes to hell for rejecting Christ.<sup>32</sup> Graham supports this claim by citing Matthew:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that

---

be saved.” Ephesians 2: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

<sup>31</sup> Revelation 20:11-15 NRSV.

<sup>32</sup> *Revival in Our Time: The Story of Billy Graham Evangelistic Campaigns Including Six of His Sermons* (Illinois: Van Kampen Press, 1950), 130-132.

day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."<sup>33</sup>

Graham offers assurance to those that have affirmed their faith in Christ and a warning to those that have not done so. Graham alludes to the omniscience of God by saying,

"He'll take over. And He won't make any mistakes. There is not going to be anybody in hell who was not supposed to be there, and there's not going to be anybody in heaven who was not supposed to be there. And I'll leave it at that."<sup>34</sup>

Continuing:

I have the problem of sin to deal with and to face, and the only one that has the answer is the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. There is no answer aside from Him. There is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only way! There is no way of cleansing from sin outside of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

The Bible according to Graham indicates that anyone who receives Christ as Lord and Savior, simultaneously, receives the gift of forgiveness and everlasting life.

Thus far, Graham argues that God does not send people to hell willingly but gives them a free choice as to their eternal destination. And faith in Christ is the only way to attain salvation. Simply put, those who have Jesus as Savior and Lord, will have heaven as home. Those who reject Christ are damned to hell.<sup>36</sup> This leads to his third exclusivist

---

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 7:21-23.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis Drummond, *The Evangelist* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 56.

<sup>35</sup> *Revival in Our Time: The Story of Billy Graham Evangelistic Campaigns Including Six of His Sermons* (Illinois: Van Kampen Press, 1950), 128.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis Drummond, *The Evangelist* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 47.

mantra: hell is a future reality that permanently separates an individual from God. Unlike, Bell and McLaren (as will be noted in chapters 3 and 4), Graham does not focus on hell as a present reality in this life, but as the eternal future destination of non-believers.

For Graham, God is merciful but He is also wrathful. Those who do not accept Christ will experience literal separation from God forever in hell.<sup>37</sup> Graham's scriptural basis for this assertion focuses on Matthew, Luke, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation. Graham's understanding of Matthew 23 is that Jesus has declared that nonbelievers will not be able to escape eternal condemnation. In condemning the Pharisees, Jesus says: "You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?"<sup>38</sup> Here it would seem that Jesus is referring to a future condemnation following life on earth.

Another illustration of hell as a future place is found in Luke 16 in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was sent to hell and was in torment and the description of the suffering apart from God is graphic. Lazarus' condition is clearly post death.

For Graham, sin did not originate with humankind, but with the angel known as Satan or Lucifer. Hell is a result of the fall of Satan, but exactly how sin originated is one of the mysteries of the Bible. On this subject, Graham says, "iniquity was found in Lucifer's heart, but there is no explanation as to how it got there."<sup>39</sup> The biblical justification for this view can be found in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation.

Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:15-17, and Revelation 12:7-9 all tell the story of Satan's fall from heaven. To be concise, Satan was blameless the day that he was created

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 46-48.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 23:33 NRSV.

<sup>39</sup> Joe E. Barnhart, *The Billy Graham Religion* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1972), 130.

until he was overcome with violence and sin resulting from his pride. His beauty and splendor led him to believe that he could raise his throne above the throne of God. A war in heaven broke out between Michael and his angels and the Devil and his angels, but the Devil was unsuccessful. As a result, there was no place in heaven for him and his angels and they were cast down into Sheol as a result of that desire.

In summary, Graham makes three major points for his exclusivistic argument from Scripture. First, God does not send people to hell willingly, but people choose heaven or hell with their free will. Second, Graham notes that belief in Christ as lord and savior is the only pathway to salvation. Third, Graham understands hell as a future reality separate from God.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Rob Bell: An Example of A New Understanding of Scripture to Justify Philosophical Pluralism

*A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear... 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? Being born in the right place, family, or country? Is it God choosing you instead of others? What kind of God is that?<sup>40</sup>*

In recent years, Rob Bell has become well known for his theological positions on the doctrine of hell, particularly as articulated in his book *Love Wins* (2011). In addition to this best-selling book, he has given numerous interviews on his position. Bell makes two major points in his understanding of Scripture. First, Christians should focus on heaven and hell as present realities: "they are dimensions of existence, and they are choices we can make every day." Second, Bell notes that Jesus seldom used the word "hell" and when he did, he was not referring to a destination in the future but rather to a present reality.

Bell suggests that Jesus' use of the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" refers almost exclusively to a present not a future reality. Christians, therefore, should not focus on the question: "How can I avoid hell in the future?" Instead, Bell urges Christians to be

---

<sup>40</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 1-3.

concerned with the present life, namely how to spread the gospel so that the "unsaved" avoid hell in this life. Bell's theology is shaped by his study of Scripture and his interaction with people of other faiths.<sup>41</sup> This thesis focuses on his use of Scripture to justify and support his theological conclusions.

Bell's highlights three verses (Matthew 6:31-34, Romans 12:2, and Psalm 118:24) in his discussion of the "Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew reads:

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."<sup>42</sup>

This passage is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, commonly held to be the most important teaching recorded in the gospels. In this passage, Jesus asserts that the key to discipleship in the Kingdom is to focus on the present. The disciples of Jesus are taught that they should not focus on the future but on the present reality. If they do this, then they can advance in spiritual growth. Bell is critical of Evangelical Christians today who imagine the "Kingdom of Heaven" in exclusively futuristic terms since Jesus rarely talks about the Kingdom this way.

In Romans, Paul writes:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 1, 3, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 6:31-34 NRSV.

<sup>43</sup> Romans 12:2 NRSV.

Bell suggests that Paul's call for transformation is this: the faithful Christians will respond to the mercy of God by offering their lives as a living sacrifice in worship to God in the present. Some scholars suggest that this verse is foundational for Christian ethics. Paul is contrasting an ongoing pressure of conforming to this age with the counter-cultural call to be transformed by a renewal of the mind. This passage commands the faithful to live as God's people in this life and in response to His call. Consequentially, Christians will be able to discern God's will for their lives in this present age.

Second, Bell cites the Psalter: "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."<sup>44</sup> Being glad today is what is required for the faithful. Rejoicing in the present is a difficult task if one is always concerned with one's future. Psalm 118 is a description of a ceremony connected with the offers of a sacrifice. Upon arrival, at the altar and before sacrifices are made, the faithful offer prayers asking that the immediate future in this present life shall be as safe and as successful as the past as been. This is a statement of trust and petition concerning the immediate future. The concern for the faithful is for the present reality in which they live. This passage, like most Old Testament passages, does not address life after death.

Finally, Bell notes that Jesus rarely used the word "hell." In fact, it is used only twelve times in the New Testament. The Greek word that gets translated as "hell" in English is the Greek word "Gehenna." Gehenna was actually a garbage dump on the south and west side of the city of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day people tossed their garbage into this hole where a fire burned constantly to consume the trash. Wild animals fought over

---

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 118:24 NRSV.

scarps of food and their teeth made a gnashing sound. Gehenna was the place with the gnashing of teeth, where the fire never ceased.<sup>45</sup> Each time Jesus refers to hell, he is referring to Gehenna, the town garbage pile not some place of eternal punishment.<sup>46</sup> In Greek, the word used in the New Testament is *gé-enna*, which is transliterated in English as Gehenna. Modern geographers have identified Gehenna as the valley east of the walls of the Old City (the Wadi Kidron), or the valley just to the west (the Waldier-Rababi), with the confluence of these two Wadis to the south(the Wadi en-Nar).<sup>47</sup> Bell's understanding is common among New Testament scholars.

Another less central point for Bell is that the New Testament offers multiple ways of understanding salvation. The question of "how is one saved?" does not have a singular answer. Although, Evangelicals traditionally have preached that faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior provides the only way to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, Bell cites numerous New Testament passages that suggest otherwise. Bell notes that the Bible says that salvation is achieved through rebirth, by following Torah, by faithfulness to Jesus in the face of persecution, and through child bearing.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Jesus says:

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

---

<sup>45</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 67-68.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 5:22, Matthew 5:30, Matthew 10:28, Luke 12:5, Matthew 18:9, Mark 9:47.

<sup>47</sup> Bailey, Lloyd R. 1986. "Gehenna : the topography of hell." *Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 3: 187-191. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2015).



Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."<sup>48</sup>

So, asks Bell, "Is it about being born again?"<sup>49</sup> Rebirth can either mean "anew" or "from above" and some of the church fathers (Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine) understood rebirth in the sense of "again" or "anew." Humans must be *reborn* to enter the Kingdom of God and the rebirth is always depicted as a birth from God. Origen also understood rebirth as being from God. Water and spirit are equally part of the twofold principle that brings about this supernatural rebirth. It is the Spirit (God) who is the principal cause of regeneration with water being God's instrument for that purpose. As a result, the effect of this rebirth is entrance into the Kingdom of God.<sup>50</sup> So, Bell asks, "Is salvation about being born again?"

Or, as Bell says, is salvation about forgiving others? He quotes Matthew 6:14-15 which reads:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Is it our ability to forgive that saves us? What if we forget or choose not to forgive someone? God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others.<sup>51</sup> In the Matthew passage

---

<sup>48</sup> John 3:3-5 NRSV.

<sup>49</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 13.

<sup>50</sup> Le Frois, Bernard J. 1952. "Spiritual motherhood of Mary in John 3:3-5." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 14, no. 2: 116-123. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 11, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 13.

above, Jesus had just taught his disciples how to pray and then Jesus reemphasizes the importance of forgiveness. Bell is not, however, advocating salvation by works, whereby we forgive others in order to attain God's forgiveness. For Bell, it is the condition of the unforgiving that makes one incapable of receiving forgiveness. Frank Stagg says, "when a door is closed, it is closed from both sides. What blocks the flow of mercy or forgiveness *from* us blocks its flow *to* us." The failure to forgive erects a barrier between the Christian and God.<sup>52</sup> As a result, that barrier affects our ability to attain salvation. The ability to forgive others is directly related to salvation. Or is salvation dependent upon doing the will of God. Bell quotes Matthew 7:21 - 23:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

A chapter later, another way to attain salvation is proposed.<sup>53</sup> Forgiving others is one way to attain salvation but so is doing the will of the father. In the passage above, Jesus had just warned the disciples about false prophets. Jesus says that the false prophets will be cast away. Yet does not, this passage serve as message to everyone about the nature of salvation? True disciples of Jesus do the will of God. It is not enough to say, "Lord, Lord." Only those who do the will of the Father demonstrate a genuine faith in Christ and

---

<sup>52</sup> Stubblefield, Jon M. 1990. "Matthew 6:5-15." *Review & Expositor* 87, no. 2: 303-307. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 11, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 14.

thus enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>54</sup> Or, as Bell preaches, does salvation come by giving our possessions to the poor. He cites Luke 19:8-9:

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

Zacchaeus, in this passage, is making this enthusiastic announcement to Christ as a sign of new life that will be devoted to others. This announcement about giving half his possessions to the poor demonstrates an act of repentance. Jesus says in the next verse that "he came to seek and save the lost" and Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus (v.3).<sup>55</sup> So, one who gives their possessions to the poor as a true response to Christ will indeed be saved.

Or, what about enduring in one's faith journey? Is this yet another way to attain salvation, according to the Bible? Bell suggest that it is by citing Matthew 10:22:

...and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

In addition to doing the will of the father and forgiving others, there is another way to salvation and that is "standing firm."<sup>56</sup> Is "standing firm" as important as doing God's will or forgiving others?

---

<sup>54</sup> Essex, Keith. 2012. "The mediatorial kingdom and salvation." *Master's Seminary Journal* 23, no. 2: 209-223. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 11, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Tannehill, Robert C. 1994. "The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric : Luke 19:1-10." *Semeia* no. 64: 201-221. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 11, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 14.

Then, with humor, Bell cites another pathway to salvation in 1 Timothy 2:15 which reads:

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Does a woman's ability to have children save her?<sup>57</sup> Does this mean that women unable to give birth are destined for hell? Saint John Chrysostom supported this position and said, "Ye women, be not cast down, because your sex has incurred blame. God has granted you another opportunity of salvation, by the bringing up of children, so that you are saved, not by yourselves, but by others." For Chrysostom, since Eve was the first woman, the whole race is now subjugated because of her act. Consequently, education of their children in godly conduct saves women.<sup>58</sup>

In summary, Bell uses Scripture in two ways to justify his pluralist point-of-view. First, Christians should focus on heaven and hell as present realities: "they are dimensions of existence, and they are choices we can make every day." Second, Bell notes that Jesus seldom used the word "hell" and when he did, he was not referring to a destination in the future, but rather to a present reality. Bell suggests that Jesus' use of the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" refers almost exclusively to a present not a future reality. A third, though less central point for Bell is that the New Testament offers multiple ways of understanding salvation.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>58</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas J. 1997. "Ascertaining women's God-ordained roles: an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15." *Bulletin For Biblical Research* 7, 107-144. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 11, 2015).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Brian McLaren: An Example of A New Understanding of Scripture to Justify Philosophical Pluralism

*A lot of people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." They're partly right: sincerity is a precious thing, and arguments about who has the correct beliefs have too often led to arrogance.<sup>59</sup>*

Brian McLaren uses Scripture in similar ways to Bell but, unlike Bell, McLaren has not devoted an entire book to considering the ultimate destiny of unbelievers. There are, however, numerous Scriptural citations in McLaren's books, interviews, and Internet blogs that suggest his pluralistic theological tendencies.

McLaren cites Scripture in four basic ways to support his understanding of "salvation." First, McLaren suggests that "eternal life" does not only refer to "life after death" but to life in this world. Second, McLaren urges Christians to be concerned more with the present life, namely how to spread the gospel to those who are less fortunate. Like Bell, McLaren focuses on heaven and hell as present realities. Third, McLaren suggests that salvation for the nation of Israel is steeped in their present reality and not some ethereal footnote at the end of life. Fourth, McLaren suggests that many Evangelical Christians have a misunderstood John 14:6, a verse often cited by exclusivists.

McLaren's emphasis on "eternal life" as a present reality is based almost exclusively on the Gospel of John's "realized eschatology."<sup>60</sup> Some are inclined to equate

---

<sup>59</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 6.

John's "life" in a quantitative way, that is "endless" or "everlasting" life. That understanding, however, is inadequate. The life that Jesus gives to believers is not a mere extension of earthly life but rather life on a higher plane that is "more abundant" in the present (John 10:10). Thus, "eternal" describes something to be lived by Christians here and now (e.g. the "eternal glory" which now "rests upon us").<sup>61</sup>

McLaren's second argument about caring for the less fortunate in this world is supported by two passages: James 1:27 and Galatians 2:10. The primary concern for the faithful Christian is to be caring for those that are less fortunate in this life. The epistle of James reads: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."<sup>62</sup> James suggests that the most "pure" type of religion concerns itself with the present reality, with caring for others. This passage reminds the faithful that doing these things is essential to doing God's will. "Widows and orphans" represent the helpless, the hopeless, and those without adequate resources. In the first century, widows and orphans, without paternal protection, had limited access the resources of the community.<sup>63</sup> Paul's letter to the Galatians serves as an admonition for Christians to focus on this life by helping the poor: "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I

---

<sup>60</sup> Realized eschatology: eschatological or "end times" passages in the New Testament do not refer to the future, but refer to the ministry of Jesus and his lasting impact on humanity.

<sup>61</sup> Roberts, J W. 1963. "Some observations on the meaning of "eternal life" in the Gospel of John." *Restoration Quarterly* 7, no. 4: 186-193 (accessed February 18, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> James 1:27 NRSV.

<sup>63</sup> Kamell, Mariam J. 2010. "James 1:27 and the church's call to mission and morals." *Crux* 46, no. 4: 15-22. (accessed February 18, 2015).

was eager to do."<sup>64</sup> Like James, Paul emphasizes that a genuine concern for the less fortunate, for those that are both helpless and hopeless is an essential part of doing God's will.

McLaren's third argument from Scripture is that salvation for the nation of Israel is exclusively a this-worldly affair. McLaren suggests that God "saves" in one primary way in the Hebrew Bible that consists of three parts. Each part is overlapping and interlocked and the nation of Israel cannot experience salvation without all three parts. The three elements of salvation are judging, forgiving, and revealing. God's redemptive judgment shows Israel that they are in error, then God forgives them, and thirdly He reveals a better way of life for Israel. In Psalm 98 salvation comes through judgment. Judgment is naming evil as evil.<sup>65</sup> This passage crescendos line by line, and culminates in the last verse. The Psalter reads: "Let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity."<sup>66</sup> Judgment in this verse, and generally in a biblical context, is a good thing. Judgment means the coming of truth and justice into the world. The Biblical writers are insistent on the fact that God will one day come judge evil, to expose it and permanently incapacitate it while vindicating good. The writers speak of this as a profound and joyful kind of salvation as evidenced in Psalm 98.<sup>67</sup> The second step of salvation in the Hebrew Bible comes through forgiveness. Forgiving, defined by McLaren, is breaking the cycle of

---

<sup>64</sup> Gal. 2:10 NRSV.

<sup>65</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 104.

<sup>66</sup> Psalm 98:9 NRSV.

<sup>67</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 103.

cause and effect, making reconciliation possible.<sup>68</sup> If the Israelites committed evil, then God would save by judging and then by forgiving. Many times the evil in the world is self-inflicted. However, God first judges that evil and then forgives that evil. This results in salvation for Israel. God shows compassion on the Israelites constantly in the Hebrew Bible. Micah reads:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.<sup>69</sup>

Micah, a prophet in the 7th century BCE, during a time of great spiritual decline for Israel, addresses the societal wrongs of the time. While Micah 7 begins in an atmosphere of gloom, it ends with one of the greatest statements of hope found in prophetic literature. The closing of this chapter is one of great optimism based on the nature of God. The people of God then, now, and in any age can make the same affirmation; they may have hope in the midst of despair because of God's goodness.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the third step is revelation. Revelation, defined by McLaren, is showing how to set chain reactions of good in motion.<sup>71</sup> The faithful Christian listens to God and lives more wisely in the future

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>69</sup> Micah 7:18-20 NRSV.

<sup>70</sup> McComiskey, Thomas Edward. "Micah 7." *Trinity Journal* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 1981): 62-68. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 25, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 104.



in accordance with God's teachings.<sup>72</sup> God teaches the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible as attested to in the Psalter. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."<sup>73</sup>

In his fourth argument from Scripture, McLaren challenges Evangelicals to revisit the often-quoted John 14:6: "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>74</sup> McLaren suggest that careful study of this verse demonstrates that Jesus is not a gift to one religion but to the whole world.<sup>75</sup> McLaren suggests that John 14:1-6, when read by many Evangelicals Christians, is read and interpreted to mean:

You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God, but not me, you will be shut out of my Father's house in heaven, where there are a few small rooms for the few who have the correct belief...Then Thomas said to him, "Lord, what about people of other religions or no religion at all? Will they go to heaven after they die? Jesus said to him, "I am the only way to heaven, and confessing the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. None will go to heaven unless they (a) personally understand and believe a clearly defined message about me, (b) personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart, (c) disavow any other religious affiliation, and (d) affiliate with the new religion I'm starting and naming after myself. None can come to God unless they get by me first." (*not* John 14:1-6).<sup>76</sup>

Yet for McLaren, Jesus is not addressing a doctrinal question like "Is Jesus the only way to heaven?" Rather, Jesus is responding to a practical question: "Jesus, where are you going?" (14:5). McLaren suggests that Christians should understand Jesus' answer in the

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>73</sup> Psalm 32:8 NRSV.

<sup>74</sup> John 14:6 NRSV.

<sup>75</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HaperOne, 2010) 215-217.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 217.

context of the question or risk severe misinterpretation. This question comes in the middle of an ongoing conversation with his confused disciples who are troubled because they fear that Jesus is going somewhere where they cannot go. So, they do not understand. Many assume that "my Father's house" (14:2) means "heaven." People with that understanding reason that John 14:6, then, explains how to go to heaven. However, that assumption cannot be easily made because Jesus refers to his father's house earlier.

John 2:15-17 reads:

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

In this passage, "my Father's house" is not referring to a heaven but to the temple in Jerusalem. For McLaren, Jesus, in John 14:6, is referring to the temple not heaven: Since Jesus is about to die, McLaren suggests that, Jesus is telling His disciples about a place for them in Jerusalem. Consequentially, "my Father's house" pertains to Jesus' core message about this life not the afterlife. McLaren, therefore offers a paraphrase of John 14:1-4:

Don't be worried, my friends, even though I've told you I'm leaving you. Trust God, and trust me. By going away, I'm going to make it possible for you to be with me again where I am now at this moment dwelling in the presence of God, living in the Kingdom of God, bearing the presence of God to this world. There's plenty of room for you in this venture! So don't worry. You know the way to the place I'm going.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) 220.

Thomas, unsatisfied with that answer, asks "How can we know the way?" Thomas is not concerned with people that have never heard of Christ and people of other religions. He is not concerned with their eternal fate. Thomas and his fellow disciples, in dismay that their teacher is going to a place that they cannot follow, are thinking about one thing: their ministry. This is the context in which John 14:6 must be read, according to McLaren. Jesus is not making a statement about the fate of unbelievers at the final judgment; he is telling his disciples how they will get from *here* (with Jesus visibly present) through a *little while* (when his body is in the grave) to *there* (with Jesus present in a new way) in Jerusalem.<sup>78</sup> "No one" is not a timeless claim on the eternal destinies of adherents to other religions or those that do not practice religion. Rather, "no one" refers to Jesus's own disciples. Furthermore, the most important part of this passage to understand is found in John 14:9; "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." McLaren suggests that Jesus is saying that if one wants to know God then one should examine his [Jesus'] life. And Jesus' life is not one of exclusion and condemnation but one of inclusion, acceptance, and love. Unfortunately, according to McLaren, the conventional understanding of John 14:6 by Evangelicals is woefully inadequate. The conventional Evangelical view is that God rejects everyone that does not have a strict exclusivist theology whereby salvation comes through Christ alone.<sup>79</sup> McLaren condemns this point-of-view.

In summary, McLaren uses Scripture in four ways to justify his perspective. First, "eternal life" does not only refer to "lifter after death" but to life in this world. Second,

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 223.

McLaren urges Christians to be concerned more with the present life and spreading the gospel. Third, McLaren suggest that salvation for the nation of Israel is about the present reality. And fourth, McLaren suggest that many Evangelicals have misunderstood John 14:6.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

American Evangelical theology has a deep and unwavering commitment to Scripture as its final authority. The theology of American Evangelicalism is predicated on the belief of "sola scriptura." Billy Graham's selective use of Scripture to address the issues of the destiny of the "unsaved" is representative of Evangelicals throughout history. His three basic points (i.e., God does not send people to hell willingly, Christ is the only pathway to salvation, and hell is a future reality that awaits non-believers) are representative of the views of millions. On the other hand, Rob Bell and Brian McLaren, like Graham, have an unwavering commitment to Scripture as the final authority and, yet, they have arrived at a different conclusion. Their understanding of Scripture leads them to a point-of-view that is described as pluralistic.

This thesis makes a contribution to the academic discourse by providing a summary of the biblical support for exclusivism and pluralism by representative Evangelical pastors. The thesis demonstrates that the Bible can be interpreted in variety ways that can lead to different conclusions. The exclusivist camp and the pluralist camp arrive at different eschatological conclusions even though both camps use similar texts to justify their understanding of Scripture with reliance on the teachings of Jesus and Paul. The major difference between these evangelical exegetes resides in their conclusions about hell. For Graham, hell is a future reality separate that separates one from God eternally. For the pluralists, hell is primarily a present reality. While this thesis has not critiqued the exegetical quality of the three pastors, this work may serve as a springboard

for future research. There are several questions raised by this research. Are these preachers using Scripture in responsible ways? Is the only difference between the exclusivist camp and pluralist camp one of Biblical interpretation? Can theologies of exclusivism and pluralism co-exist in the Bible? In this era of postmodern Christianity, will traditional exclusivist Christianity fade away in American Evangelicalism? Or is the turn to pluralism by some Evangelicals only a passing phenomenon?

This thesis did not attempt to give its readers a hermeneutical tool to examine the issue. Rather, this work serves as a starting point for future research.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Personal Reflection

The debate over the eternal destination of nonbelievers has been a part of Christianity for all centuries and continues to be relevant among contemporary pastors. Rob Bell and Brian McLaren are leading advocates of the emerging view of philosophical pluralism and Billy Graham is a leading advocate for the traditional Evangelical exclusivist view. Graham, however, did not preach in a world that was as pluralistic as the one that Christians find themselves in today. Does the pluralistic context of the twenty-first century demand a new way for Evangelicals to look at things? Some Christians are rethinking their ideas about heaven, hell, and the eternal destination of nonbelievers. Often times, the discussion is framed as either/or. One is either an exclusivist or a pluralist. However, this either/or notion depicted in theological conversations that sets these views in direct opposition to each other may ignore key insights from each side. Of course exclusivism and pluralism are fundamentally different in their belief about the destination of nonbelievers, but it does not mean that the two theologies are completely incompatible. There are important conclusions in both theologies that need to be acknowledged. Philosophical pluralism is more sympathetic to non-Christians and lends itself to more open communication with other religions. It is beneficial because it is not as narrow-minded and arrogant. On the other hand, philosophical pluralism is overreaching. Is there empirical justification for the notion that all religions have the same goal? Can the traditional Evangelical view simply be thrown away in light of changing demographics? Exclusivism is harsh in its judgments claiming

that a person that does not believe and affirm that Christ as Lord and Savior will go to hell. This traditional Evangelical point-of-view raises many questions. What about the death of an infant? What about those that have not heard the message of Christianity? What about devout adherents to other religions? These types of questions are problematic to the exclusivist camp

Might all Christians agree that God is mysterious? Human understanding of God often falls short. It is not wrong for a Christian to say "I do not know." That answer has been lost in our Evangelical expectation that people must have a firm answer for everything. "I do not know" as an answer may be the most Christ like answer to this question.

Therefore, I do not know. I do not have a complete theology of heaven and hell, but this thesis serves as a beginning to developing that theology. The primary task of Christians, I believe, is not to focus on their eternal destination. A Christianity that is solely concerned with life after death misses the point of the Christian narrative and misunderstands the person of Jesus. The point of Christianity is to serve God in this lifetime in both word and action. The eternal destination of nonbelievers is a secondary point that is too often made the primary point of Christianity.

At this point in my life, I respect the exclusivist that says people do not go to heaven if they do not have faith in Christ. I cannot ignore the biblical passages cited by Billy Graham, and I believe there must be a sense of accountability for human actions that manifests itself as hell. But I have grown in my appreciation for philosophical pluralism in the sense that I am not willing to say that there will never be a point in time where all of humanity is not doomed to hell. God does not operate on a level that humans



can ever fully understand. God's actions are always grounded in love, and that love may be strong enough to redeem all of humanity after death in a way that I am not able to explain. I did not become a Christian in order to avoid hell. I wanted Jesus to transform me in this present life.

Evangelism is still important because I want people to know about Jesus but I am relieved of the Messiah complex knowing that God is the ultimate judge that determines eternal destinies. Simply put, Jesus wants us to love God and love people in this present reality. To treat Christianity as one's "ticket to heaven" and not live in accordance with the ways of Christ is the ultimate form of hedonism. That approach to the cross belittles Jesus' salvific death and resurrection.

If I happen to be completely wrong about Christianity and there is no form of life after death, I will still be satisfied with this life. I will be able to honestly say that I lived for other people and for something bigger than myself. At the beginning of this project, I thought my answer to this question of "who goes to heaven?" was drastically important and I was convinced of the exclusivist argument. Now, however, I am convinced that my answer to that question is not as important as I once thought. The important matter is how I live my life. NT Wright puts it clearly when he says:

The point of following Jesus isn't simply so that we can be sure of going to a better place than this after we die. Our future beyond death is enormously important, but the nature of the Christian hope is such that it plays back into the present life. We're called here and now, to be instruments of God's new creation, the world-put-to-rights, which has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus's followers are supposed to be not simply beneficiaries but also agents.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), xi introduction.

Above all, Jesus gives us the greatest commandment. To paraphrase it: love God and love people.<sup>81</sup> That is something that both exclusivists and pluralists, despite their eschatological differences, are commanded to do as faithful Christians.

---

<sup>81</sup> Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bailey, Lloyd R. 1986. "Gehenna: The Topography of Hell." *Biblical Archaeologist* 49 (3): 187–91.
- Barnhart, Joe E. 1973. *The Billy Graham Religion*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Pr.
- Bell, Rob. 2011. *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Carson, Donald. 1993. *The Challenge From Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel*. Deerfield, Illinois: Criswell Theological Review.
- Chan, Francis, and Preston Sprinkle. 2011. *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up*. David C Cook.
- Drummond, Lewis A. 2001. *The Evangelist: The Worldwide Impact of Billy Graham*. Nashville: Word.
- Essex, Keith. 2012. "The Mediatorial Kingdom and Salvation." *Master's Seminary Journal* 23 (2): 209–23.
- Frost, David, and Fred Bauer. 1997. *Billy Graham: Personal Thoughts of a Public Man*. English Language edition. St. Louis: Chariot Victor Pub.
- Graham, Billy. 1950. *Revival In Our Time The Story of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Campaigns Including Six of His Sermons*. 2nd ed. edition. Van Kampen Press.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1993. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnston, Robert K. 1979. *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Kamell, Mariam J. 2010. "James 1:27 and the Church's Call to Mission and Morals." *Crux* 46 (4): 15–22.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. 1997. "Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (January): 107–44.
- Le Frois, Bernard J. 1952. "Spiritual Motherhood of Mary in John 3:3-5." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 14 (2): 116–23.

- Livingstone, E. A., ed. 2006. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd Revised edition edition. Oxford; New York: OUP Oxford.
- Lowe, Janet. 1999. *Billy Graham Speaks: Insight from the World's Greatest Preacher*. 1 edition. New York: Wiley.
- McComiskey, Thomas Edward. 1981. "Micah 7." *Trinity Journal* 2 (1): 62–68.
- McLaren, Brian D. 2006. *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything*. Nashville, Tenn: W Publishing Group.
- McLaren, Brian D. 2006. *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/protestant, Liberal/conservative, Mystical/poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/contemplative, ... Emergent, Unfinished Christian*. El Cajon, CA: Zondervan/Youth Specialties.
- McLaren, Brian D. 2011. *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*. Reprint edition. New York: HarperOne.
- McLoughlin, William G. 1960. *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age*. New York: Ronald Pr.
- Miller, Steven P. 2014. *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, Christopher W., and Robert A. Peterson, eds. 2008. *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*. Downers Grove, Ill.; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic.
- Roberts, J W. 1963. "Some Observations on the Meaning of 'Eternal Life' in the Gospel of John." *Restoration Quarterly* 7 (4): 186–93.
- Ryken, Philip Graham. 2012. *Is Jesus the Only Way?* Redesign edition. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway.
- Stubblefield, Jon M. 1990. "Matthew 6:5-15." *Review & Expositor* 87 (2): 303–7.
- Tannehill, Robert C. 1994. "The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric: Luke 19:1-10." *Semeia*, no. 64: 201–21.
- Wright, N. T. 2009. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. 1 edition. HarperCollins e-books.