



Response To “Farewell, Rob Bell”: A Biblical Response to Love Wins, Larry Dixon, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011, 70 pp.

Larry Dixon and I were once friends and colleagues doing evangelism together on the streets of West Berlin in the early seventies. I eventually wrote a novel based on that experience (<http://waynenorthey.com/chrysalis-crucible/>) that treats in part this theme. One may in fact detect an uncanny likeness to Larry in one of my novel’s characters.

I say ironically: **Reading the Bible is dangerous!** When read as Law Book, Science Book, or Gift Certificate, it leads invariably to grief, it seems... Western Christianity is massive fallout zone across Church History annals of bad biblical interpretation... There is no doubt sadly even a longer list of *how not* to view the Bible. In Larry’s case, the Bible is graceless “Law Book” as I said in a review of another of his books (see: [War and Hell](#) on this website).

This response to his latest book, “Farewell, Rob Bell”, is an invitation to renew our dialogue. Perhaps Larry would also be open to discussion around Kevin Miller’s documentary [Hellbound](#)? Sadly, probably not.

The book is the author’s second go at hell. Larry argued in his first book on the doctrine of hell that *there is not Good News, period*, but there exists as “gospel” supplement “*The Other Side of the Good News*”, the book’s title. I believe Larry is right: there *is* another side, and it is indeed “hell”. Only this is not a hell of God’s doing, *but of human postulating*. As C.S. Lewis expressed it in *The Screwtape Letters*: “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right, then, have it your way.’ ” It seems Larry would “have it his way” and hold out for a teaching on a “hell” of “eternal conscious torment” in profound misreading of the biblical texts, in missing the whole point of *Gospel* as Good News.

James Alison argues in [Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination](#), that “The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (p. 48).” Therefore,

“The commonly held understanding of hell remains strictly within the apocalyptic imagination, that is, it is the result of a violent separation between the good and the evil worked by a vengeful god. It seems to me that if hell is understood thus, *we have quite simply not understood the Christian faith*; and the Christian story, instead of being the creative rupture in the system of this world, has come to be nothing less than its sacralization. That is, *the good news which Jesus brought has been quite simply lost* (p. 175, emphasis added).”

The authors of *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (See my [Captain America and The Armageddon Factor](#)) present a masterful historical and theological survey of the United States with an eye to the *political* fallout of the “sacralization” of “the system of this world” which they dub “zealous nationalism”. The biblical interpretation stream behind hell as

“eternal conscious torment” is likewise in opposition to the “prophetic realism” stream of God’s revelation in Christ mapped by them.

Larry’s two attempts to argue “biblically” in favour of hell as “eternal conscious torment” could benefit much from Brad Jersak’s much more careful and biblically nuanced [*Her Gates Will Never be Shut: Hell, Hope, and the New Jerusalem*](#). Such interpretations as Larry’s that emerged early in the Church displayed “massive faithlessness” in its reading Jesus violently, for a “violent Jesus” is oxymoronic. (Richard Hays demonstrates theologically what he dubs this “*massive faithlessness*” of the Church in [*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*](#), and Willard Swartley argues *the centrality of peace* to New Testament revelation exegetically in [*Covenant of Peace*](#). One doubts that Larry Dixon (or J.I. Packer) has read or appropriated these penetrating biblical studies.)

On the issue of hell, that of “just war” (an unbiblical pagan teaching by Cicero and Greek predecessors), and “just deserts” (disallowed in Christian vocabulary according to New Testament theologians C.F.D. Moule in an article entitled [*Punishment and Retribution: An Attempt to Delimit Their Scope in New Testament Thought*](#) (reprinted also in Brad Jersak’s and Michael Hardin’s [*Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*](#)), and according to Chris Marshall in [*Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*](#)), “**Christian violence**” is also an “**oxymoron**”. This is James Megivern’s designation in his massive study, [*The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*](#). Dixon’s, and much of Western Christendom’s reading of Scripture in support of “Christian violence” seems an exercise of *thinking to speak the language of Zion* without internalizing the cardinal accents of **grace and mercy**: a “zealous nationalism” doublespeak of peace through violence as opposed to peaceful “prophetic realism”. **Such wrong accent gives the game away, and fundamentally negates Gospel.**

Biblical accents witness resolutely *against scapegoating sacrifice*. As Jesus quoted Hosea: “*Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice (Matt. 9:13).’*” This appears to be a sweeping, straightforward indictment of Western Christendom’s pervasive embrace of “Christian violence”, something René Girard has argued in many penetrating publications, including [*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*](#). This seems *precisely* what Western Christendom theologically writ large *did not do: learn to show mercy over sacrifice!* (Though the Church did not start out violently, on the contrary eschewed it!) Early on however, the Church unaccountably inverted Psalm 30:5: “*For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime.*” One wonders why this devastating perversion?

Further, this inversion happened despite the finality of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice; despite Christ’s teaching and embodying “*Love your enemies*” in contradiction of “*Hate your enemies*”. To play on the French “accent grave”, Jesus invariably emphasized an *accent grâce* that *makes all the difference in how one reads the Bible*. One asks: How do Larry and others so consistently misread the text? Larry learned to speak *German* well when we were in *West Berlin*. I urge him to do better at speaking *Grace* now that we are *in Christ*. It simply comes down to that.

Not to learn the biblical language shot through with this *accent grâce* appears, as Alison says, fundamental *failure to understand the Christian faith* and worse: **failure to make “the faith once delivered” even intelligible**: it becomes a foreign language to the Bible, not that of Zion.

A grace-eyed read of the biblical material suggests that an Unholy Justice Trinity of *just war, just deserts, and just (eternal conscious torment in) hell* is ultimately shattered by the eternally sustained Gospel high note of *amazing grace, how sweet the sound*. The Trinity is about loving embrace of the Other and about the call on humanity to “go and do likewise”. This loving embrace is eternal in the Godhead and likewise limitlessly elicited in humanity. If it proves otherwise, it is humanity’s, not God’s choice and doing. It seems that such a theology as Larry’s eternal *exclusion* is in fact eternal *heresy* (false choice). Again, one wonders why this persistent choice so dominant in Western Christianity, so core *anti-Christ*?

Tragically, a perversion of “the faith once delivered” has been promulgated and preached for centuries in the West. When (invariably) wed to any and all forms of oxymoronic “Christian violence” it has wreaked great swaths of counter-Gospel devastation, has in fact inverted the Gospel into an “other-side-bad-news” phenomenon *that it never was meant to be*, and has ultimately betrayed the entire sweep of revelation of God in Christ. It has further left a consequent trail of literal destruction of multiplied millions of victims on battlefields, gallows, and prison compounds for whom Christ died. There has been in Christendom a direct line from destruction of one’s earthly enemies to relegating such to hell. “Give ‘em hell, Harry!” was worst Western Christendom instance to date, and used of President Truman jokingly in a post-War election. In reality, Harry Truman (a Baptist Sunday School teacher!) authorized that kind of relegation to hell in the dropping of two atomic bombs that directly liquidated over 200,000 men, women, and children: the greatest “herodian” instantaneous mass slaughter of innocents in history. Yet it is almost entirely glossed over by the majority of Western Christians as necessary to end the War, and/or to save American GI lives. Tragically, one could go on indefinitely about the Church’s “massive faithlessness” in using and blessing “Christian violence”...

A hell of “eternal conscious torment” that Larry and most of Western Christendom uphold appears to be on the contrary *one hell of a Gospel sell-out*, an ultimate denial of God’s eternal language of *accent grâce* through Christ. Astoundingly, Larry and cohorts for centuries have committed this Gospel *lèse majesté* in the *name of Gospel faithfulness*! One suspects they instead have driven people by the millions (of those they did not slaughter) to rejection of this false “gospel” through effecting a tragic inoculation against the Good News with their “Christian violence” teaching on hell!

Larry’s book cover illustration by cartoonist Ron Wheeler in this light presents as tragic Gospel perversion. Does it wish or threaten Rob Bell’s imminent spiritual demise in shark-infested waters? Perhaps, in spite of Larry’s and the cartoonist’s intent, one can see rather a prophetic Christ-figure in that small rowboat, one driven “outside the camp” of pharisaical “Orthodoxy”. Such a Christ-figure in that case is set to become a “fisher of men” in infested “waters” where the needy always are to be found: amongst tax collector sharks and toothy shyster sinners of every stripe. This happens however only when one is far away from “Fortress Orthodoxy” of whatever pharisaical stripe. Otherwise, one embraces the chilling phenomenon of doing *evangelism without the Gospel*!

Chris Marshall who wrote the magisterial [*Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*](#), and later [*Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*](#) commented on Larry’s first

publication on hell thus: “I did have a look at Dixon’s book What a depressing piece!! It illustrates the problems in pulling out a single theme for analysis in isolation from the larger context of the biblical story (May 9, 1999, E-mail correspondence).” I suggest Larry’s read on hell is an exercise in consistent failure to apply an *accent grâce* to Christian discourse. It abets an evangelism carried on *without the Gospel of grace*. This is tragic.

I suggest Larry’s “Farewell, Rob Bell” means instead when spoken with an *accent grâce*, “*Well done, my good and faithful servant...*” I encourage Larry to (re?)read Douglas Frank’s 1986 study, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century*. Frank argued that the core characteristic of dominant evangelicalism is a *spirit of pharisaism*; a spirit not likely easily to disappear amongst those who set the evangelical agenda. Frank yearned nonetheless for, “... a church that awakens to the Stranger, Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ of the biblical witness; not the denatured, ideologically and morally useful Jesus Christ of evangelicalism... (p. 277).” The Epilogue’s penultimate paragraph reads:

Whether in auspicious or declining times, as we have seen, we [evangelicals] display a tenacious commitment to self-deceit. It is true that we are those who like to think we heed Jeremiah’s words, ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.’ Our history, however, gives evidence of Jeremiah’s wisdom in adding these words: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?’ (Jer. 17:7, 9). In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits (p. 278).

“*In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits.*” This is perhaps the best commentary I know on Larry Dixon’s “*Farewell, Rob Bell*”. Stephen Travis observed in *Christ and the Judgement of God* that those most desirous of upholding a traditional eternal-conscious-torment view of hell tend to be those most assured they will never go there, which he suggested smacks of self-serving (and one can add, profoundly anti-Gospel)! Jesus might in fact say to such: “*Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering* (Luke 11:52).” This “key to knowledge” is none other than the *accent grâce* with which the Gospel is shot through.

The preceding few verses read: “*Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all* (47 – 51).” Might one paraphrase?: *Therefore false prophets of just war, just deserts and just hell will be held responsible for the blood of all the victims of Christendom’s wars, executions, and imprisonments, and for millions who rejected the Gospel due to an evangelism done without the Gospel, an evangelism missing an accent grâce ...*

One may legitimately ask: Are the doctrines of hell as “just eternal conscious torment”, and related “just war” and “just deserts”, *arguably Christianity’s “deepest self-deceits”*?