

## **Book Review of *Solving Hell: A Mystery Story*, by Chris Friesen, A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, for the Degree Master of Theology, 2003, unpublished**

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The creative thesis discussed below was written by the son of a couple in our current Home Study Group. It is an honour to include a Review of it here. If you would like access to it, please contact me via waynenorthey.com.

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In 1992 a former missionary colleague, Larry Dixon, published *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teachings on Hell*, Wheaton: Victor. Dixon's conclusion was there is an

adequacy [in] the traditional view of hell... and that alternative views do not adequately reflect the scriptural data concerning hell... [namely] the *traditional eternal conscious punishment view* (pp. 172 & 173, emphasis added).

By contrast this Master's thesis concludes in the Abstract,

... that *mainstream Evangelicalism's doctrine of hell is biblically, theologically, and experientially illegitimate...* (p. iv, emphasis in original)

Dixon's subtitle already brooks no compromise: anyone not espousing his view contradicts Jesus' teachings. Widely regarded Evangelical theologian J. I. Packer in *The Other Side's* Foreword writes,

To believe what the Bible appears to say about human destiny apart from the grace of God is a bitter pill indeed, and no one should wonder that attempts are made to explore alternative understandings of God's revelation on this topic. It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. I do not think so, nor does Dr. Dixon... For one I am grateful for his work, and commend it to all who are willing to be biblically rational on this sombre subject (p. 7).

Chris Friesen alternatively writes that support of mainstream Evangelicalism's view represented by Dixon and Packer reveals that

... the doctrine's modernist approach to Scripture attempts to turn the sayings of Jesus into a repository of facts about eschatological punishment, flattering Jesus as 'Lord' but not doing what he says; its worldview of 'default damnation' fails to integrate the significance of Jesus' redemptive solidarity with the lost and the persevering *agape* of the supremely self-giving God whom he has revealed; its approach to life and death does not engage the perplexities and ambiguities of actual human experience but retreats into cynical pragmatism ('we have to have hell to keep the mission program running') and a disengaged rationalism that scorns 'sentimentality' one minute, and, paradoxically, 'mere human reason' the next (pp. iv & v).

Given Rob Bell's recent book, *Love Wins* (2011) and subsequent Evangelical response, including a tract by Dixon, *Farewell, Rob Bell* (2011) with a cover that has an ominous look of Evangelical fatwa, and given Kevin Miller's 2012 documentary *Hellbound?!*, this is a timely topic. Given also that the thesis was presented in 2003, it speaks to a genuine struggle with the issue absent any kind of "cashing in" on its current in vogue appeal.

Friesen explains in the Abstract that "Solving Hell" is the fictional story of a seminary student who is writing a thesis entitled, 'What Did Jesus Mean? The Language of Hell and Doom in the Gospels.' (p.iv)" Through a series of e-mail exchanges, diary entries, and actual "excerpts" of chapters from the fictional thesis, the main character, Clayton Schellenberg, interacts primarily with an older brother, a missionary, a friend who had embraced then rejected the faith, and a church elder. A few other e-mails to and from Clayton's parents, his thesis advisor, a pastor, and Clayton's wife are sprinkled through the story.

The "Notes" section contains a running commentary throughout referencing the novel's page numbers. All the documents directly quoted are real, and may be found in the "Works Cited".

There are five sections: I - To Love Mercy; II - Prooftexts; III - Rhetoric; IV - Theology; V - Permission To Hope.

The story unfolds against the backdrop trauma of a house fire that had destroyed everything, experienced by Clayton and his family, while he lived as a teacher on an Indian Reserve, Fisher Lake, in northern Alberta. Now he, with his family, is in seminary in California. The mystery of who started the fire and why is only solved at the very end of the novel. Perhaps not unlike the solving of the mystery of hell in the novel, which requires a close read through to the very end, with similar conjectures in a way on who would start such a "fire" and why?

The author skillfully interweaves the elements of e-mail exchanges, diary entries, and thesis excerpts with the characters mentioned above, to draw us into the hard work of thesis writing in general, and getting one's mind around "hell" specifically, including understanding faith, biblical authority, and the biblical interpretive task along the way. One sees indeed how life experience colours all perspectives. One identifies also with Schellenberg's rough patches in thesis writing and in the "crazy-making" sometimes of the ideas themselves.

Friesen also integrates well overall the sources that inform the range of understandings and viewpoints throughout the novel. None seems forced. One can read the thesis as a novel without recourse to the "Notes", and be drawn in. Or one can read the "Notes" alongside, and appreciate the larger at times more academic discussion, and the seamless introduction of the range of ideas from the sources into the novel's flow. The various viewpoints represented also seem authentically brought out. There is no apparent caricature or "straw-man" woodenness to the characters' expression of viewpoints.

The novel introduces us well to the pertinent texts of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, the frame of Friesen's investigation. The novel form engages the mind and imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Miller also published in 2017 *Hellrazed?* To further investigate this idea of ultimate retribution so tragically dominant in Western Christianity.

The story unfolds organized under the five themes mentioned, and comes to a climax in the dramatic death of one character who is not part of the dialogue throughout, but whose presence informs even sharpens the “mystery of hell” as it does the mystery of the house fire itself.

Friesen poses in the “Abstract” the ultimate question behind the mystery story: *Is God good?* It is investigated against the backdrop of Evangelicalism’s dominant embrace of hell as shown in Dixon and Packer above. The

thesis question proper is, *How can the people of the God revealed in Jesus Christ believe that God will eternally torture or destroy any human being? Do the words, ministry, and identity of Jesus support such a belief?* (p. iv, emphasis in original)

Friesen indicates there is a crucial “shadow-question” too about how an Evangelical exploring such questions is impacted. Additional questions arise about hope outside a dominant Evangelical view of salvation; about challenging Evangelicalism’s prevailing view of “hell” in relation to Scriptural authority; and about the true ground of Christian mission.

The Abstract ends with eight succinct and challenging hermeneutical, theological, and practical affirmations, all of which are discerned in the body of the novel. (The thesis itself raises the question: can art and academics meet? Indeed!, is this reader’s answer.)

Dwight Wilson years ago in *Armageddon Now!* (1991) said that Evangelicalism found “prophecy” à la dispensationalism too helpful in evangelism to ever dispense with, despite its perfect failure record shown in the study of linking biblical prophecy and historical events. So Friesen with reference to Evangelicalism’s utilitarian use of hell.

Eastern Orthodoxy, notwithstanding Packer’s claim above, has had a long tradition of teaching that claims God’s love is the constant, but is experienced differently by those who embrace or reject God. The “fires of hell” are no less however God’s steadfast love for the recalcitrant in an endless agony to bring us home.

Further, the question of hell, which indeed is finally the question, “*Is God good?*”, may be connected to two related queries:

- the legitimacy of the State’s destruction of its external enemies in “*just war*”,
- and the legitimacy of the State’s destruction of its domestic enemies in “*just deserts*”. *In this respect, hell, war and crime are all peace issues.*

The thesis is not easy thinking! But it is engaging, and in attempting to “solve hell”, Chris Friesen takes us ultimately to the very core of who God is in relation to humanity. Now would be an appropriate time for its publication.

## References

Bell, Rob (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, San Francisco: HarperOne.

Dixon, Larry (2011). *"Farewell, Rob Bell": A Biblical Response to Love Wins*, CreateSpace.

Miller, Kevin (2017). *Hellrazed?* Kindle Direct Publishing.

**Wilson, Dwight (1991). *Armageddon Now!: The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*, The Institute for Christian Economics.**