

## Bellwethers of a New American Christianity? Sallie McFague, Rob Bell, and Evangelical (Re)Vision

Sallie McFague was one of the most important English-speaking feminist and ecological theologians within the last generation. Her bibliography of book-length essays forms a constructive arc from *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975)<sup>1</sup> through her more recent contributions to the environmental conversation,<sup>2</sup> including consultation to the Dalai Lama. Though McFague's project was largely ignored or rejected by evangelicals as it emerged in the 1980s, there are lines of continuity between McFague's key themes and significant contemporary North American evangelical conversation. Specifically, evangelicals are reconsidering their relationship to the written Scriptures, reassessing an understanding of women and the feminine, reorienting their relationship to the environment, and redefining their relationship to more liberal expressions of Protestant Christianity. Evangelicalism, even limited to the Anglo-American experience, is a diverse movement rather than a single, monolithic creed. Moreover, evangelical thought is not the province of intellectuals and theologians and church doctors—a post-Reformation ivory tower magisterium. Rather, evangelical thought emerges organically out of the lived experience of evangelical adherents, shaped by pastors and writers and church doctors. With the goal of exploring this grassroots theological zeitgeist we will focus on one evangelical voice, that of mega-pastor and bestselling author Rob Bell—the man who

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1975). Available free online at "Religion Online," <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=452>.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., see Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress (2008); *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

*Christianity Today* senior editor Mark Galli calls “the evangelical *par excellence*.”<sup>3</sup> Bell captures the popular nature of evangelical thought, and within his written work takes up the most significant themes of McFague’s project without any ostensive link to McFague’s work herself. We will then, finally, explore the nature of these lines of continuity between Bell’s spiritual theology and McFague’s project. The result is that Bell’s project, and the lines of continuity between Bell and McFague, suggests an evangelical redefinition in play.

## Defining an Evangelical

Defining evangelicalism is notoriously difficult.<sup>4</sup> Our interest here is descriptive, and not prescriptive, but the task is still a challenge. Most definitional conversations begin with “Bebbington’s Quadrilateral.”<sup>5</sup> Dave Bebbington’s interest is in English evangelicalism from the 18<sup>th</sup> through the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but his approach is a common starting point for discussion; especially, it avoids a conversation about “who is in” and, thus, “who is out,” along the lines of institutional affiliation or alliance with key evangelical leaders.<sup>6</sup> In chapter one of *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Bebbington outlines four “characteristics” of evangelicals: 1)

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Rob Bell,” *Christianity Today* 57 no 4 (May 2013), 35.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), viii-ix. Elwell chooses the “in” and “out” method through a program of self-identification and influence, choosing an inclusive approach.

<sup>5</sup> “Bebbington’s definition is routinely employed to identify evangelicalism; no other definition comes close to rivaling its level of general acceptance,” Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (ed. Timothy Larsen & Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1. Larsen goes on to list key scholars of evangelicalism that follow Bebbington, including: Donald M. Lewis, ed., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); and Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2, where he argues that a definition of historical continuity is key: “It is this continuing set of characteristics that reveals the existence of an Evangelical tradition. They need to be examined, for no other criterion for defining Evangelicalism is satisfactory.” The reader will note that this paper provides evangelical relational matrices whenever they are possible to delineate. The advantages of using the Bebbington model will be made clear, but Anglo-American evangelicalism remains a movement, and thus its doctrinal distinctive are founded upon relational identity markers.

Biblicism; 2) Crucicentrism; 3) Conversionism<sup>7</sup>; and 4) Activism, in the sense of practical piety.

American religion scholar George Marsden adds a fifth characteristic: 5)

Transdenominationalism,<sup>8</sup> a concept that is foundational to Bebbington's historical analysis, if

not one of the cardinal characteristics.<sup>9</sup> In the debate-styled *The Spectrum of Evangelicalism:*

*Four Views*, Canadian-American evangelical theologian, John Stackhouse, argues that

Crucicentric should also mean Trinitarian and Christocentric and that Activism is really

Missional. He also adds a more complex sixth characteristic: 6) a mix of Orthodoxy (right

thinking), Orthopraxy (right living), and Orthopathy (right feeling).<sup>10</sup> American postconservative

evangelical Roger E. Olson, in conversation with Stackhouse, confirms this sixth element,

naming it "generous orthodoxy,"<sup>11</sup> while conservative evangelical R. Albert Mohler, Jr. thinks

the definitional schema based on Bebbington's Quadrilateral is so "vague" that it is "fairly

useless in determining the limits."<sup>12</sup>

If we choose not to adapt Bebbington's Quadrilateral or an adaptation of it, what approach should we take? Two of the scholars in *The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, including

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the belief that human beings "must turn from their sin, believe in the saving work of Christ, and commit themselves to a life of discipleship and service" (<http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/page.aspx?pid=775>).

<sup>8</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1-6). See also John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Generic Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (ed. Andrew David Naselli & Collin Hansen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 121-126.

<sup>9</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 1, "Evangelical religion is a popular Protestant movement that has existed in Britain since the 1730s. It is not to be equated with any single Christian denomination, for it influenced the existing churches during the eighteenth century and generated many more in subsequent years. It has found expression in a variety of institutional forms, a wine that has been poured into many bottles."

<sup>10</sup> Stackhouse, "Generic Evangelicalism," 124. Stackhouse's primary argument is that evangelicals are "Christians" in the classical sense.

<sup>11</sup> Roger E. Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (ed. Andrew David Naselli & Collin Hansen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 177. The term "generous orthodoxy" is connected to a fellow "postconservative" and leader of the emerging movement, Brian McLaren. See his *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Stackhouse says that he is not "terribly sympathetic to his agenda of raising many more questions than he satisfactorily answers" (109), and Mohler says that McLaren, Olson, and late Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz are new kinds of Protestant liberals rather than progressive evangelicals (87-88).

<sup>12</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Conservative Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (ed. Andrew David Naselli & Collin Hansen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 73.

Mohler, use “Set Theory” to define evangelicalism. Christian theologian Miroslav Volf describe this mathematical approach:

In analyzing the category ‘Christian’ missiologist Paul Hiebert suggests that we make use of the mathematical categories of ‘bounded sets,’ ‘fuzzy,’ and ‘centered sets.’ Bounded sets function on the principle ‘either/or’; an apple is either an apple or it is not; it cannot be partly apple and partly pear. Fuzzy sets, on the other hand, have no sharp boundaries; things are fluid with no stable point of reference and with various degrees of inclusion—as when a mountain merges into the plains. A centered set is defined by a center and the relationship of things to that center, by a movement toward it or away from it. The category of ‘Christian,’ Hiebert suggests, should be understood as a centered set. A demarcation line exists, but the focus is not on ‘maintaining the boundary’ but on reaffirming the center.<sup>13</sup>

Mohler agrees with Hiebert that Christianity is a centre-defined movement, but argues that there are boundary questions as well. Thus, he adopts a centre-bounded set approach to understanding evangelicalism. Taking for granted the centre as shared among Biblically-founded Christians, Mohler spends more time addressing the boundaries: “Our task is to be clear about what the gospel is and is not” (96). Mohler adapts the metaphor of theological triage. Just like a waiting room nurse will triage patients, Mohler argues that there are first-, second-, and third-level doctrines within Christian faith. The first-level doctrines are essential to all Christians, namely the Trinity, full deity and humanity of Jesus, justification by faith alone, the authority of the Scriptures—beliefs confirmed by the ecumenical creeds and common to Christians in most

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<sup>13</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 71.

places in most times. The second-level doctrines are those that evangelicals may disagree on but that denominations will foster consensus in, such as the means or mode of baptism. Third-level beliefs are those that individual Christians, even within denominations or even local congregations, may disagree over, such as eschatological timelines. If we imagine the three levels of Mohler's triage as concentric circles around the gospel (the centred set, the centre circle), in defining what an evangelical is, the bounded-set line is drawn only at the inside circle, the first-level doctrines. The other two levels of doctrines are characteristic of what evangelicals might believe, but are not normative or necessary for salvation.<sup>14</sup>

Stackhouse agrees that there are conversations to be had along the boundaries, but he does not draw the circle as tightly closed as Mohler does, and argues that evangelicalism is essentially a "big tent" movement, saying that,

it is part of the very ethos of evangelicalism to recognize differences of opinion precisely about what the Bible does and doesn't say about a host of issues, many of them quite consequential.... [I]t now appears that none of us can properly say, 'Well, anyone who holds to X can't be an evangelical, because the Bible clearly forbids X. And that's that.'<sup>15</sup>

Mohler does not think that "none of us can properly" make those distinctions, but Olson very much agrees with Stackhouse, arguing that organizations are defined by bounded sets and movements are defined by centred sets. He argues that,

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<sup>14</sup> Mohler, "Conservative Evangelicalism," 68-96.

<sup>15</sup> Stackhouse, "Generic Evangelicalism," 126.

Evangelicalism has no definable boundaries and cannot have them.... And without boundaries it is simply impossible to say with certainty who is and who is not an evangelical.<sup>16</sup>

As we turn to Rob Bell, the question of what is a “boundary” issue becomes paramount, as he tests classic 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelical beliefs of how one reads the Bible and who gets “in” in the end.

There are other schemata for defining evangelicalism. Thomas A. Askew and Richard V. Pierard in *The American Church Experience: A Concise History* use four “basic elements,” namely Bible as the single authority for belief and practice, conversion as pivotal for Christian life, a focus on spiritual growth, and, finally evangelism and mission—four elements that are not far from Bebbington’s Quadrilateral.<sup>17</sup> Timothy Larsen, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, gives contextual supplement to Bebbington’s Quadrilateral by arguing that that an evangelical is:

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;

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<sup>16</sup> Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicalism,” 163.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas A. Askew and Richard V. Pierard, *The American Church Experience: A Concise History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 10.

5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.<sup>18</sup>

Even in this programme—jokingly referred to as Larsen’s Pentagon—Larsen expects his readers to be using some adapted version of Bebbington’s Quadrilateral as he provides a more complex definition in order to delineate “evangelical theology.”<sup>19</sup>

## A Brief Outline of McFague’s Project

Sallie McFague, under most definitions, is not an evangelical. Although each of McFague’s books builds upon the last, her theological project is most clearly defined in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982),<sup>20</sup> building upon her work in *Speaking in Parables*. Her subsequent books, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987)<sup>21</sup> and *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993)<sup>22</sup> refine her *Metaphorical Theology* and work out the implications, focussing on McFague’s most recognizable themes.

McFague’s presuppositional starting point is captured well in the epigraph of the first chapter of *Metaphorical Theology*, a quotation by Simone Weil: “There is a God. There is no

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<sup>18</sup> Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” 1.

<sup>19</sup> This conversation is limited to the Anglo-American Evangelical movement. For a more sophisticated look at Bebbington’s Quadrilateral tested globally, see Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), esp. ch. 6, “The Gathering Center.”

<sup>20</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

God.”<sup>23</sup> For McFague, this means that although God is real in the human believer’s love, God is unreal in that God is not like the believer’s words. All theology, all God-talk, then, is, in Emily Dickinson’s words, telling it slant. McFague’s insistence throughout her writing is that there is “no innocent eye”: no reader comes to a text without prejudices and biases that skew her reading.<sup>24</sup> McFague, then, is invested in de-centering her audience, in having readers step back and recognize the perspectival nature of human knowing. She argues that no one comes to Jesus without an idea of God already in place; Jesus realigns an understanding of God, but does not initiate it.<sup>25</sup> In this way Gadamer is important to McFague’s approach: with prejudices in hand we go to the text openly, we allow ourselves to be critiqued by the text, and our horizons will ultimately emerge and be drawn together in the critical act of reading.<sup>26</sup>

Granted the perspectival nature of human knowing, McFague’s theological project begins in earnest with language and moves on to consider the models of God that we choose to use. In her intentional approach to engaging the world with God-talk, in *Metaphorical Theology* McFague seeks to situate herself between two poles. The first pole is the pole of idolatry, religious language that forgets the transcendence of God. It is theology that forgets that God is not like our talk, and is often lost in literalism, Bibliolatry, and Jesusolatry.<sup>27</sup> The second pole is the pole of irrelevance, which forgets God’s immanence as it ignores the credibility of contemporary culture. Despite the fact that “biblical imagery is often vivid, powerful, shocking, and revolutionary,”<sup>28</sup> there is cultural distance in our connection with the Bible, and the Bible itself excludes some special groups, like women.<sup>29</sup> In her way between the poles, McFague

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<sup>23</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 55, 102, etc.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 50-51.

<sup>26</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 56-57.

<sup>27</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 5-6, 18.

<sup>28</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 9.



argues that, following Paul Ricoeur, theological language avoids kill-the-symbol literalism on one hand, and conceptual silence on the other; instead, it uses conceptual language that is tensive and symbolic, abstract and imagistic.<sup>30</sup>

Although Sallie McFague tries to walk the knife's edge between polar opposites, or to bring antithetical tendencies together into a new synthesis, much of *Metaphorical Theology* is about correcting what she sees as skewed tendencies in contemporary Christian thinking. In the tension hinted at above—conceptual, abstract language over against symbolic, imagistic language—even though she argues for a synthesis of the two, and insists that neither overwhelms the other, her focus in this book is on the imagistic. Thus, McFague introduces the weighted term, *Metaphorical Theology*. It is the perspectival nature of thinking—the “is and is not,” to use Ricoeur's phrase<sup>31</sup>—that allows her to focus on the imagistic side of Ricoeur's conceptual-symbolic tension. As C.S. Lewis says, “all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor,”<sup>32</sup> so even abstract language comes to us metaphorically within the social construct of human thinking. Metaphors, in particular, draw together dissimilar thoughts, allowing new thinking and new connections. While this primacy of approach is not meant to replace abstraction, the sideways-glance nature of metaphors both represent human experience and have the payoff of allowing for creative development in thought.<sup>33</sup>

McFague's project of *Metaphorical Theology* also aims at two corrections in reading the Scripture. First, according to McFague, we cannot view Scripture as canonical, as authoritative either as revelation or inspired by God. Instead, the Bible is a *classical* text—the quintessentially

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<sup>30</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 38, 134-136, etc. See also McFague, *Models of God*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (ed. Walter Hooper; Cambridge: CUP, 1969), 265, at the end of the essay, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare.” Qtd. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> See esp. chapter two of *Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God*.

Christian text.<sup>34</sup> Because of the “is and is not” nature of God, we simply cannot imagine the Bible as God’s Word in a literal way. Second, McFague refocuses our reading of the Bible upon the poetic value of the text. In particular, she argues that parables are the central form in the New Testament.<sup>35</sup> The parables have a peculiar and essential function in drawing out the root-metaphor of Jesus ministry: the Kingdom of God, or, as McFague translates the concept, the nature of the human-divine relationship. The parables redefine the Kingdom in Jewish expectation, arguing that the Kingdom is not worldly, is in opposition to power systems, and is non-hierarchal.<sup>36</sup> But more than the content of the parables is what they are as texts—the realities they expose as they tell their story. The parables are essentially relational in their makeup, demonstrating the believer’s way of being in community. They are dynamic, plot-driven, and, especially, transformative.<sup>37</sup>

Following her earlier *Speaking in Parables*, McFague presents a stirring picture of parables in the New Testament, drawing upon the work of C.H. Dodd, Robert Funk, Paul Ricoeur, and John Dominic Crossan.<sup>38</sup> Key for Metaphorical Theology is that parables are: 1) personal, describing the divine-human relationship; 2) transformative, initiating a process of reorientation; 3) mundane, invested in everyday life; 4) inversive and subversive, offering an assault on the economic, social, and mythic structures of dominant culture; 5) imagistic, teasing the imagination into participator thinking and action; and 6) indirect, speaking along the way about God and reality. These aspects of parables then set a threefold foundation for McFague’s application of the New Testament in her work: 1) parables are iconoclastic and revolutionary, allowing us to re-vision our understanding of God and society; 2) parables are relational, so our

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<sup>34</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 42-54.

<sup>36</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 46-47.

models of God and society should be relational; and 3) Jesus is a parable of God, a great surprise that is mundane, extravagant, and radical, drawing people God-ward. This final point is what McFague calls a “parabolic Christology.” “In contrast to incarnational Christology,” McFague argues, “parabolic Christology does not involve an assumption continuity or identity between the human and the divine.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, McFague seeks to avoid the idolatrous nature of God-talk, and aims towards relevance in her theological project. Metaphorical Theology starts with the parables of Jesus and Jesus as parable.<sup>40</sup>

McFague does not end with parables. As Robert Funk notes, there is a tortuous route from parables to systematic theology.<sup>41</sup> But, as McFague argues, we must travel that path, and her book builds that path from parables and parabolic Christology to models of God, which are the translation of metaphors into theoretical frameworks.<sup>42</sup> McFague finishes *Metaphorical Theology* by testing a well-used model of God, that of “God the Father.” She argues that this masculine model is weak in a number of ways, namely that it cannot cope with the feminist critique, and, despite the claim of some Christian thinkers, “God the Father” is not the root-metaphor of Christianity; rather, the Kingdom of God is that root-metaphor.<sup>43</sup> Throughout chapter five, McFague offers an extensive feminist critique of the Father model, looking not only at women’s experience, but also at Jesus as one who challenges expectations. The fatherhood model has become an idol, and must therefore be limited.<sup>44</sup> A robust theology, according to McFague, must take account of women’s experience, and must address all human bondage, not

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<sup>39</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> McFague seems to move beyond this limited role of Jesus as parable-teller by adding “his table fellowship with outcasts,” “his death on a cross,” and the “permanency of the way of the cross, the way of self-sacrificial, befriending love inviting all to fulfillment,” in *Models of God*, 49, 59; see also 50-53. Arguably, each of these are parabolic and inverse in McFague’s presentation in *Metaphorical Theology*.

<sup>41</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> “A model is a metaphor with ‘staying power,’” McFague, *Models of God*, 34. For models, see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, chs. 3-4, with a summary pp. 124-126.

<sup>43</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 145-146.

<sup>44</sup> McFague explores the limitations of the Father model further in *Models of God*, esp. 98-99.

just the experience of women. Not willing to go to the extent of “immanentizing” God as some feminist thinkers do,<sup>45</sup> McFague searches for new models. While she hints at more possibilities, McFague concludes *Metaphorical Theology* testing a model drawn from Christian tradition, that of “God as friend.”<sup>46</sup> There are limits to this model, McFague admits. It is potentially individualistic, so it must have other models to complement it, such as God as leader and protector. Moreover, in what ways do we express awe, fear, and worship when God is friend? Finally, does the Friend-God capture the depth of being as other models do?<sup>47</sup>

It is in her subsequent monograph, *Models of God*, that McFague both extends the value of Friend as model of God and offers two other models: God as Mother and God as Lover. The three models are the working out of McFague’s relational primacy, her translation of the Kingdom of God as root-metaphor into working models of Christian thought and practice. The foundation of *Models of God* reiterates the need for theology to be relevant in what McFague calls an ecological, nuclear age. McFague, then, reiterates her project of Metaphorical Theology, and seizes upon the image of “The World As God’s Body”—not as a fourth model next to the relational models of Mother, Friend, and Lover, but a principle within the root-metaphor of relationships. The temptation when thinking of the Kingdom of God is to think of this world as the monarch’s realm. A better remythologization of the gospel is to think of the world as God’s body. Thinking not of God as ruler, king, lord, patriarch, etc., but as one invested in and connected to the world—caring, responsive, mutually dependent.<sup>48</sup> When God is present in this way, interconnected, then the relational models of Mother, Friend, and Lover make sense.

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<sup>45</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 167.

<sup>46</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 177-192.

<sup>47</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 190-192.

<sup>48</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 61, 69-78.

McFague's theological principles are certainly intriguing. Her project to remythologize Christian thought so that the World is God's Body adds a corrective to historical theological focus and draws the believer into relationship with her environment. After *Models of God*, from *The Body of God* to the present, nearly all of her books have been invested in the ecological, environmental conversation. Her emphasis of a relational lens is no less engaging. Following three of the Greek words for love, *storge*, *philia*, and *eros*, McFague patterns her models of Mother, Friend, and Lover, drawing out relational aspects of God that include creativity and justice, salvation and healing, sustenance and companionship. The result of her project is that McFague has been deeply influential in three key areas: her approach of Metaphorical Theology, her relational model of God as Mother, and her emphasis of creation care in the metaphor of the World as God's Body.

## McFague and the Evangelical Response

### *Reviews of McFague*

Despite sitting intentionally within a progressive stream, Sallie McFague saw her project, at least in *Metaphorical Theology*, as forging a *via media* between conservative absolutizing and liberation relevatizing.<sup>49</sup> However, as Roderick T. Leupp, the reviewer of *Metaphorical Theology* for the *Journal of Evangelical Theology* noted, McFague's project "will provoke the timid and the scrupulously orthodox."<sup>50</sup> The reviewer for *Reformed Journal* and author of the

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<sup>49</sup> See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, esp. 54-55; McFague, *Models of God*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Roderick T. Leupp, review of *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, by Sallie McFague. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 2 (1989): 285.

two volume *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*,<sup>51</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, called McFague's God "revisionist" and questions whether it is "the same God as that of Abiahham, Isaac, and Jacob."<sup>52</sup> Needless to say, the evangelical response to McFague's project was not overwhelmingly positive, especially during the late 1980s, when the Moral Majority was gaining in strength and the stage for the American culture wars of the 1990s had been set. Neither evangelical reviewer negates McFague's project, however. Leupp quips that there "is much to turn the head and grind the teeth,"<sup>53</sup> but that "McFague's vision is as necessary as it is disquieting."<sup>54</sup> Bloesch is, perhaps, more grudging in his praise, but no less engaged. He argues that "feminist theology has much to teach us"<sup>55</sup>—"us" being conservative evangelicals engaged in theological conversation—and "that feminist theology is a bona fide theology in its own right and, whether we like it or not, must be taken seriously as a vital theological option for today."<sup>56</sup>

### *Women in the Domain of Evangelical Theology*

There is, perhaps, no reason to expect a glowing evangelical response to McFague's project, particularly in her feminist models of God. Historically, Christian thought and leadership has been primarily the domain of men. This has been no less true of contemporary evangelicalism. While there are exceptions, they are exceptions that prove the rule. Walter A. Elwell's 1993 *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* lists 33 prominent evangelical thinkers, all

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<sup>51</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume 1: God, Authority and Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982); *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume 2: Life, Ministry, and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982).

<sup>52</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, "Living God or Ideological Construct," review of *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, by Sallie McFague. *Reformed Journal* 34 no 6 (1984), 30.

<sup>53</sup> Leupp, review of *Models of God*, 285.

<sup>54</sup> Leupp, review of *Models of God*, 285.

<sup>55</sup> Bloesch, "Living God," 31.

<sup>56</sup> Bloesch, "Living God," 29.

of whom are male.<sup>57</sup> The Wikipedia list of influential evangelicals has a greater female presence. Of the twenty-six 20<sup>th</sup> century influential evangelicals, there is one woman, Aimee Semple McPherson, a Pentecostal preacher and media savant. The ratio of contemporary evangelicals actually has fewer women, with only two women of ninety-five: Joyce Meyers, a preacher and popular author; and Jeri Massi, an author and documentarian. There were no women listed among the biblical scholars or theologians.<sup>58</sup> Of *Time* magazine's "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America" list in 2006, there are two women—Joyce Meyers, and political consultant Diane Knippers—as well as two couples.<sup>59</sup> The Church Report's list of "50 Most Influential Christians In America" from the same period puts author and tele-pastor Joel Osteen, evangelist Billy Graham, and mega-church pastor Bill Hybels in the top three, with Focus on the Family's James Dobson in fifth and Rob Bell in tenth. Joyce Meyer is the only top ten female at seventh, with TV personality Paula White at nineteenth, and three other women in the top fifty.<sup>60</sup>

In a broader survey, Ed. L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz's *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theology* surveys fifteen theologians in thirteen theological streams within the 20<sup>th</sup> century; only the "Theology of Woman's Experience" features a woman, Rosemary Radford Ruether.<sup>61</sup> Prominent evangelical theologian, Alister E. McGrath, collects literally hundreds of readings in his *The Christian Theology Reader*,<sup>62</sup> which covers mostly modern theological readings with a few ancient and medieval ones; only fifteen readings are from women, including feminist authors Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Phyllis Trible, novelist and Christian thinker Dorothy L. Sayers, and Julian of Norwich, whose writing in this volume is on

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<sup>57</sup> Walter A. Elwell, *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_evangelical\\_Christians#Contemporary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_evangelical_Christians#Contemporary). Rob Bell has never been on this list.

<sup>59</sup> [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235\\_1993243,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243,00.html).

<sup>60</sup> See the reprint here:

<http://www.7culturalmountains.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=39896&columnid=4338>.

<sup>61</sup> Ed. L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). Despite being only one woman among fourteen men, Ruether does make the cover.

<sup>62</sup> Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

the topic of God our Mother. Evangelical theologian Millard J. Erickson's 3 Volume *Readings in Christian Theology* includes 108 readings, most of which are from the modern era; not a single woman's work warrants inclusion in his list.<sup>63</sup> Needless to say, women do not feature prominently in the historical theological conversation, and, aside from celebrities and popular authors, are no more influential in the evangelical scene. Perhaps Sallie McFague, echoing Letty Russell, is correct: "feminist, black, and Third World theologies need to be qualified by an adjective, whereas white, male, Western theologies are called just theology."<sup>64</sup>

*Christianity Today*, founded by Billy Graham in 1956 to be theologically conservative and socially liberal,<sup>65</sup> and now arguably the leading mouthpiece for popular evangelical thought, is more optimistic. In the cover story for October, 2012, "50 Women You Should Know," Sarah Pulliam Bailey argues that, "It's not just a golden moment for Christian women, of course, but for the entire church, as we benefit from the fruit of their manifold gifts."<sup>66</sup> Despite the apparent absence in the lists above, Bailey argues that, "Today evangelicalism continues to feel the effects of women's leadership."<sup>67</sup> Bailey mentions, specifically, author Rosalind Rinker who was influential in the 1950s: "The idea that Christians could talk to God as a friend, conversationally,

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<sup>63</sup> Millard J. Erickson, ed., *Readings in Christian Theology: Volume 1: The Living God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973); *Readings in Christian Theology: Volume 2: Man's Need and God's Gift* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); *Readings in Christian Theology: Volume 3: The New Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979). Outside of feminist theologians, there are simply very few women in this upper echelon of influential theologians. Erickson's project, perhaps, is too early to capture the stream of women thinkers that emerge, and there is no particular space in his project for theologies of identity. It is notable that a century ago in the ninety essays, including two anonymous insertions, of R.A. Torrey, ed., *The Fundamentals* (4 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), there is at least one woman author. These essays, with prominent names like Torrey, Benjamin B. Warfield, and James Orr, offer a critique of liberal Christianity and affirm a moderate, biblically-based perspective that would first be called fundamentalism, and later emerge as evangelicalism.

<sup>64</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1998), 12. *Christianity Today* is a response to the more liberal *Christian Century*.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "50 Women You Should Know," 23.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "50 Women You Should Know," 23.



was Rinker's radical idea that is now commonplace.”<sup>68</sup> The list that follows is not numerically aggregated, but divides these influential women into categories, including: Science, Business, and the Environment; Arts, Entertainment, and Sports; Writing and Publishing; Social Justice; Political Life and Thought; Church Life and Ministry; and Education.

It is a list that contains both Marilynne Robinson and Sarah Palin, business leaders and pulpit preachers, farm wife bloggers and antislavery activists. While it includes academics and scholars, and could be augmented with any number of seminary professors whose work may yet prove to be influential, and with rising leaders like Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, the General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, none of these women are particularly influential in theological development—in the ongoing God-talk of evangelicalism or the larger Christian community. Moreover, there is something ostensibly forced about the *Christianity Today* list. The other lists are filled with men we know and could know more about; the *CT* list is about women we *should* know, but generally do not. As this list is being compiled by the editors of *Christianity Today*, Hanna Rosen of *The Atlantic* is arguing that, “Man has been the dominant sex since, well, the dawn of mankind. But for the first time in human history, that is changing—and with shocking speed.”<sup>69</sup> It is difficult not to note the incongruity in more conservative Christian circles that editors need to draw attention to forgotten or ignored corners of women’s activities, citing as the most recent precedent to the list a devotional author from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>68</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “50 Women You Should Know,” 23. Bailey argues that previous divisions of public and private life in the new social media also degrade the distinctions argued by traditionalist evangelicals.

<sup>69</sup> Hanna Rosen, “The End of Men,” *The Atlantic* (Jul/Aug 2010), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/308135/>.

## *Evangelical Tensions on the Role of Women*

Moreover, Sarah Pulliam Bailey notes that there are tensions in the conversation about women. Evangelicals are Biblicistic, so develop their theology using the Bible as their starting point in conversation. Feminist or womanist theologies, at the very least, include by way of approach women's experience and a critique of patriarchalism.<sup>70</sup> It is no surprise, then, that, aside from ostensive cultural pressures, some evangelicals, after a faithful theological enquiry according to their chosen hermeneutic, affirm complementarian, patriarchal, or hierarchical perspectives on the roles of woman and men in family and church leadership.

Perhaps the best example in contemporary American evangelicalism is Wayne Grudem. Grudem holds a PhD in New Testament from the University of Cambridge, is a tenured professor, and is a co-founder of The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). The CBMW rejects all views that value either women or men over the other, and have published statements against abuse in the home.<sup>71</sup> According to its central purpose, the CBMW intends "to set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God, because these teachings are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church."<sup>72</sup> An example of this complementarian view is captured in one of the sixth affirmation of the Danvers Statement:

Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the curse.

1. In the family, husbands should forsake harsh or selfish leadership and grow in love and care for their wives; wives should forsake resistance to their husbands' authority

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<sup>70</sup> See Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12. Reuther references Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 29-50.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., see <http://cbmw.org/statement-on-abuse/>.

<sup>72</sup> CBMW, "Mission and Vision," <http://cbmw.org/mission-vision/>.

- and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands' leadership (Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; Tit 2:3-5; 1 Pet 3:1-7).
2. In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:11-15).<sup>73</sup>

The “nevertheless” is the key difference between Grudem and others concerned with a shift in understanding of gender in culture and theology, those Grudem has dubbed as “evangelical feminists”—a label he used of egalitarians and more progressive evangelicals from his plenary address at the Evangelical Theological Society in 1986<sup>74</sup> through more recent books, such as *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (2006)<sup>75</sup> and *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (2006).<sup>76</sup> When asking whether evangelical feminism is a pathway to liberalism, Grudem is not offering a merely academic observation. In Grudem's view, this is a path that undermines Christianity itself, and will strip all sense of the uniquely masculine in human experience before adopting the image of “God our Mother.”<sup>77</sup> Grudem sees this trajectory in the evangelical not-profit group Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), citing two books that address God as “Mother” directly.<sup>78</sup> Evangelical feminists

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<sup>73</sup> CBMW, “Danvers Statement,” <http://cbmw.org/core-beliefs/>.

<sup>74</sup> See Wayne Grudem, “Personal Reflections on the History of the CBMW and the State of the Gender Debate,” 2007, <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/personal-reflections-on-the-history-of-cbmw-and-the-state-of-the-gender-debate/>.

<sup>75</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 223-235.

<sup>78</sup> E.g., Paul R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”? Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 1; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *God: A Word for Girls and Boys* (Louisville, KY: Glad River, 1993), 23, which includes the prayer, “God, our Mother, we thank you that you love us so much and want the best for us. Thank you for trusting us enough to let us do things on our own....”

are, thus, “changing the doctrine of God as revealed in Scripture,” “undermining the authority of the Bible,” and are inaugurating “the final step on the path toward liberalism.”<sup>79</sup>

Grudem’s target is not feminist theologians like Sallie McFague, whom he would regard as having rejected the Biblical core of Christianity.<sup>80</sup> Instead, Grudem begins *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism* by taking aim at “major evangelical feminist claims,”<sup>81</sup> best represented by the 2004 *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Groothuis, with Gordon Fee as contributing editor.<sup>82</sup> His tone is congenial, but one of Grudem’s vocational concerns is countering evangelical egalitarianism, captured most prominently in the CBE. Christians for Biblical Equality are:

a nonprofit organization of Christian men and women who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NIV 2011).<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to the CBMW, the CBE encourages mutual deference in the home and opportunities for both men and women to pursue ministry, service, and leadership at any level in the church.

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<sup>79</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 235. It is, perhaps, actually approval of homosexuality that is the final step toward liberalism.

<sup>80</sup> As far as I have been able to ascertain, Grudem never says that liberal Christians are not really Christians or will go to hell. But the implication for conservatives is clear. Inclusivistic author, Samuel H. Fountain, says that “Conservative Christians frequently suggest that more liberal Christians are not saved and face damnation,” *Jesus: A Man for All Time: A Provocative Look at the Meaning of Jesus* (Eloquent Books, 2008), 4. While Fountain does not footnote this assertion, it undoubtedly captures the sentiment of a segment of Anglo-American evangelicalism.

<sup>81</sup> Grudem, *Countering the Claims*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004). See a chapter-by-chapter response in the CBMW’s publication, *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 10:1 (Spring 2005).

<sup>83</sup> CBC, “Our Mission and History,” <http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/our-mission-and-history>.

The evangelical egalitarian movement represented by CBE is growing as the number of notable, and notably, male theologians and biblical scholars offer their support for an egalitarian reading of the Christian Scriptures. Other than the names already mentioned—postconservative Evangelical Roger Olson, evangelical John Stackhouse, and Pentecostal Gordon Fee—other names emerge in the discussion, like Wesleyan professor of Early Christianity, Ben Witherington, III,<sup>84</sup> open theist and animal rights activist in the Anabaptist tradition, Greg Boyd,<sup>85</sup> retired Church of England bishop, N.T. Wright,<sup>86</sup> and late Baptist theologian, Stanley J. Grenz.<sup>87</sup> Among the most influential evangelical academic works on the topic is William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (2001).<sup>88</sup> Webb, a Canadian Baptist minister and Seminary professor, develops what he calls a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic, which supplements grammatico-historical exegesis with a biblical theology that seeks to understand historical contexts, both ancient and contemporary, and seeks to see the redemptive arc moving forward from the biblical past. In Webb's reading, this redemptive arc means that we should understand our relationship with women in egalitarian

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<sup>84</sup> See <http://blog.beliefnet.com/bibleandculture/2009/10/why-arguments-against-women-in-ministry-arent-biblical.html> and <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/04/10/ben-witherington-women-in-ministry/>.

<sup>85</sup> <http://reknew.org/>.

<sup>86</sup> N.T. Wright, "Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis" (2004), [http://ntwrightpage.com/wright\\_women\\_service\\_church.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/wright_women_service_church.htm). See also Tom Wright and David Stancliffe, "Women Bishops: A Response to Cardinal Kasper," *Fulcrum*, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20060721kasper.cfm?doc=126>. Wright's argument for the ordination of women is, he argues, based on solid biblical exegesis, not the principle of progress. He writes an editorial in *The Times* arguing that if, given space, full equality for women in the Church of England will emerge from its biblical foundation. By contrast, progress for the sake of progress "dilutes the argument for women bishops," Tom Wright, "It's About the Bible, not Fake Ideas of Progress," *The Times*, Nov 23, 2012, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3609019.ece>.

<sup>87</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

<sup>88</sup> William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). See esp. ch. 2 for the schematic of the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic.

rather than patriarchal terms. In his penultimate chapter, “What if I Am Wrong?”, Webb openly challenges the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood on their position.<sup>89</sup>

### *American Evangelical Perspectives on the Environment*

It seems, then, that there is a shifting theological response regarding women, but what about the environment? An authentically evangelical dialogue with feminist theologians like Sallie McFague is going to include a complex reading of a canon that emerged within patriarchal cultures where the relational metaphor of “God as Father” seems foreign to McFague’s imaginative supposition that “God is Mother.” Moreover, it will have to negotiate the difficult identity terrain, as feminist and liberal theologies are outside the tent of evangelical conversation in any case. Being labeled a “liberal” could be a death sentence to some delicately placed within evangelical circles.<sup>90</sup> The idea that the World is God’s Body, then, is going to be no less foreign. This, despite the fact that the threads of environmental concern are not nearly so deeply tangled in historical Christian theological foundations. Humanity is set upon the earth as stewards of creation, and American evangelicalism emerges from largely agrarian roots with a powerful connection to land and sea and sky. Yet, there is great ambiguity in this question among evangelicals. For many complex contextual reasons that are beyond the scope of this project to trace out, North American evangelicalism has been resistant to aspects of the environmental movements, in particular baring down against the idea that dramatic climate change is caused or

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<sup>89</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, 243-244. Webb argues that the CBMW, even in their principles, have room to move within patriarchal positions if they adopted the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic. See also Webb’s blog, “Redemptive Christianity,” <http://redemptivechristianity.com/>.

<sup>90</sup> From the same impetus, agreeing Rob Bell may also be dangerous. See Tom Breen, “Pastor Loses Job Amidst Rob Bell Debate,” *Huffington Post*, Mar 24, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/24/pastor-loses-job-amidst-r\\_0\\_n\\_840120.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/24/pastor-loses-job-amidst-r_0_n_840120.html).

accentuated by human activity. Needless to say, Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" was not warmly received among most conservative Christian Americans.

Still, there have been shifts in the public consciousness of Americans in general and evangelicals specifically in their understanding of their relationship to nature. Evangelical sociological researchers, The Barna Group, saw this shift in the weeks before the election of Barack Obama in 2008: "One of the intriguing findings of the research is that millions of evangelicals—often perceived to be on the sidelines of the green movement—have become more environmentally conscious in the last year."<sup>91</sup> In this survey, 90% of evangelicals would like Christians to focus more on creation care—two-thirds of them feeling quite strongly about this sentiment. Evangelicals were still skeptical—or more skeptical than the general public—showing distrust in the media's representation of the story of global warming. David Kinnaman, the director of research, noted that Christians are in tension over this topic, but half of Christians have made a shift in their lifestyle for the sake of the environment.<sup>92</sup> More recent surveys continue to see skepticism mixed with an increasing concern for the environment, so that the majority of evangelicals see the environment as a pressing issue.<sup>93</sup> There is, in evangelicalism, a "Creation Care" movement, represented by popular authors,<sup>94</sup> signalled by a *Christianity Today* study guide by that name,<sup>95</sup> and supported by the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN),

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<sup>91</sup> The Barna Group, "Evangelicals Go 'Green' with Caution," Sep 22, 2008, [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/23-evangelicals-go-qgreenq-with-caution#.UIRqID\\_CuRg](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/23-evangelicals-go-qgreenq-with-caution#.UIRqID_CuRg).

<sup>92</sup> The Barna Group, "Evangelicals Go 'Green' with Caution," Sep 22, 2008, [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/23-evangelicals-go-qgreenq-with-caution#.UIRqID\\_CuRg](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/23-evangelicals-go-qgreenq-with-caution#.UIRqID_CuRg).

<sup>93</sup> E.g., see N. Smith and A. Leiserowitz, "American Evangelicals and Global Warming," *Global Environmental Change* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.04.001>; Dan Gilgoff, "Evangelicals Still Conservative, But Defy Issue Stereotypes," Beliefnet, <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/Politics/2008/01/Beliefnet-Poll-Evangelicals-Still-Conservative-But-Defy-Issue-Stereotypes.aspx#sthash.OOelvlwz.dpuf>.

<sup>94</sup> E.g., Jonathan Merritt, *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet* (Nashville, TN: FaithWords, 2010); John Stott, "Creation Care," ch. 3 of *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2010).

<sup>95</sup> *Christianity Today Study Series: Creation Care* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

environmental activists since 1993,<sup>96</sup> and The Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), a group of prominent American Evangelical leaders whose Statement's first claim is unambiguous:

“Human-Induced Climate Change is Real and increasing international instability, which could lead to more security threats to our nation.”<sup>97</sup> The ECI Statement continues to argue that the hardest hit will be the poor and marginalized, so it is the Christian's moral responsibility to act. Finally, they argue, the need to respond is urgent.

Resistance remains, however. Wayne Grudem, whom we have already met, is a Senior Fellow of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation (CA), which resists the ECI. The Cornwall Alliance also has a statement: “An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming.” They are likewise unambiguous, and their rhetorical streams are identical to ECI's. For example:

We deny that Earth and its ecosystems are the fragile and unstable products of chance, and particularly that Earth's climate system is vulnerable to dangerous alteration because of minuscule changes in atmospheric chemistry. Recent warming was neither abnormally large nor abnormally rapid. There is no convincing scientific evidence that human contribution to greenhouse gases is causing dangerous global warming.<sup>98</sup>

They agree with the ECI that the conversation is “especially critical,” but for opposite reasons. The Cornwall Alliance argues that to invest in renewable energy sources and the Kyoto Protocol would be economically disastrous with little benefit. The result is that, “it is the poor who are often the ones most affected by well-intended, but misguided, public policies to combat

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<sup>96</sup> See <http://www.creationcare.org/>. See “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation,” <http://www.creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39>.

<sup>97</sup> <http://christiansandclimate.org/statement/>. Among notable signatories is Rob Bell.

<sup>98</sup> Cornwall Alliance, “An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming,” <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/articles/read/an-evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>.



exaggerated risks.”<sup>99</sup> In a mirror argument to the ECI, the CA argues that it is speaking on behalf of the least of these.

The CA response is not significant, and it is mounting its pressure upon the public discourse. A recent CA book, *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death* by Dr. James A. Wanliss, drives the conversation forward.<sup>100</sup> The promotional video uses phrases like, “one of the greatest deceptions of our day,” “this so-called Green Dragon [Environmentalism] is seducing your children in our classrooms and popular culture, its lusts for political power now extends to the highest global levels, and its twisted view of the world elevates nature above the needs of people—even the poorest and the most helpless,” “environmentalism ... is your enemy,” and in the context of “resist the Devil” (James 4:7) the host urges the listener to “rise up, slay the Green Dragon.”<sup>101</sup> Militant language and violent images are used throughout; the CA believes that environmentalism is the threat of a generation.

Despite the fact that more than 1500 pastors and leaders have signed the CA’s declaration, it could be that the Cornwall Alliance is on the more extreme edge of evangelical social belief. An anecdote by conservative evangelical novelist and philanthropist Randy Alcorn indicates that resistance to environmentalism in evangelicalism may continue despite a shift in survey responses. In his foreword to *Gardening Eden: How Creation Care Will Change Your Faith, Your Life, and Our World* (2009) by architect and urban designer Michael Abbaté, Alcorn describe a recent speech he gave to thousands of conservative evangelical college students. He was speaking on eschatology, describing a new creation perspective, and adlibbed a rhetorical question: “of all people, as stewards [of creation], don’t you think we ought to have reasonable

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<sup>99</sup> Cornwall Alliance, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/about/faq/>.

<sup>100</sup> James A. Wanliss, *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death* (The Cornwall Alliance, 2011).

<sup>101</sup> “Resisting the Green Dragon,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGEOFipx70U>.

concern for our environment and try to take care of it?”<sup>102</sup> A single person broke into spontaneous applause, and then stopped, awkwardly, apologetically. No one joined in to support the lone clapper—there was not even a token clap-along. Alcorn continued his speech, joking that one person actually applauded to “a pro-environment statement at a conservative evangelical gathering.”<sup>103</sup>

Besides the lack of support for the solo clapper in Alcorn’s audience, what is intriguing is the great pains Alcorn goes to so that the reader understands that he really is theologically conservative, and generally conservative on social and political issues. This point is not insignificant, as evangelicals are concerned with avoiding a liberal label. Alcorn argues that the resistance to environmentalism among evangelicals is that it is viewed as part of “the *liberal* agenda.” And, therefore, “What *sounds* socially liberal *sounds* theologically liberal. And, understandably, biblical conservatives don’t want to sound liberal.”<sup>104</sup>

## Bellwether Evangelical Identity Markers

This statement captures the crux of the issue for many of the social issues that Sallie McFague addresses. Even under the less politicized guise of “creation care,” evangelical environmentalists face an uphill battle. The rhetoric of the damage for “the least of these” is used by both sides of the evangelical environmental debate, but the real issue may be much deeper. The issues of women and the environment may be, to return to a set theory discussion, an issue of “boundary” conversations. Or these issues may be, as the CA claim, a clash of worldviews,

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Abbaté, *Gardening Eden: How Creation Care Will Change Your Faith, Your Life, and Our World* by (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2009), x.

<sup>103</sup> Abbaté, *Gardening Eden*, x.

<sup>104</sup> Abbaté, *Gardening Eden*, x-xi. Emphasis original. Alcorn offers some skepticism of global warming science, but urges the conservative toward creation care as critical thinkers and engaged citizens.

issues that cut to the heart of core belief, central doctrines, the essence of what it means to be a Christian. It is no accidental slip of the tongue that Wayne Grudem calls egalitarians “evangelical feminists”—even if they have not used the term of themselves.<sup>105</sup>

Cultural politics and social issues aside, McFague’s decentering of the believer’s approach to Scripture alone would set her outside of evangelical dialogue. Agreeing with Randy Alcorn’s confession above, Gary J. Dorrien argues that, with few exceptions, “evangelicals rarely found much of a basis in liberal theology for a meaningful dialogue....”<sup>106</sup> Dorrien notes Clark Pinnock as an exception, and of those mentioned thus far, Roger Olson, N.T. Wright, and Greg Boyd have important dialogues with liberal thinkers. But there remains a number of significant barriers between evangelicals and liberals that makes McFague’s hermeneutical questions suspect to evangelicals.

Recall Randy Alcorn, the progressive environmentalist who asserted his theological conservatism. While he draws his evangelical community forward on the issue of creation care, his response to Rob Bell’s 2011 bestselling *Love Wins* is reactionary. Mark Galli, senior editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote a book-length response to Bell’s *Love Wins*. Randy Alcorn provides the foreword for Galli’s *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News is Better than Love*

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<sup>105</sup> There are some evangelicals who label themselves as feminists. John Stackhouse, discussed above, takes on the term cautiously in his *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). He walks the line between patriarchal or complementarian evangelicals and egalitarians, while still arguing for a feminist position: “I have concluded also, however, that neither side’s characteristic line of argumentation is entirely right. Hence, I here set forth a way of looking at gender than can affirm much, even most, of what both sides typically say and yet does so in what I hope is a single, coherent paradigm that amounts finally to a Christian feminism,” 10. Stackhouse pays homage to Webb’s Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic, arguing for a “dynamic” approach to biblical ethics, not a static one—a movement, as Webb calls it, the redemptive arc I describe above. See also Stackhouse’s colleagues in Maxine Hancock, ed., *Christian Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality, and Community* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003), which includes essays by Stackhouse, Fee, and Grenz.

<sup>106</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity: 1950-2005* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 530.

Wins (2011).<sup>107</sup> Alcorn's comments are telling, not just to segue into Bell's work, but as an indication of the unsettled nature of evangelical self-definition and the core of the evangelical conversation: biblical interpretation. Alcorn begins by situating Galli:

Mark [Galli] is a big-tent evangelical, but his penetrating critique of Rob Bell's *Love Wins* is a reminder that even a big tent can be only so big before terms such as *Bible-believing* and *evangelical*, in the historic sense, begin to lose their meaning.

Evangelical churches, both Calvinist and Arminian—while holding divergent positions on baptism, church government, and eschatology—have consistently held the common belief that everyone will go to one of two eternal destinations: heaven or hell.<sup>108</sup>

Alcorn suggests that Galli does not “hastily draw lines in the sand.”<sup>109</sup> But he does draw lines, and despite the difficult dual-streamed tensions evangelicalism holds together, something about what Bell said steps outside of that tradition—beyond “common belief.” Is it the belief in a particular doctrine that sets Bell outside the “big tent”? Alcorn argues that it is Bell's interpretive approach that does so:

If we are free to reinterpret God's Word at will, then it is not authoritative. Christ is not authoritative. I am authoritative. My faith becomes merely a collection of fleeting opinions, always subject to revision. And that is something quite different from historic, biblically grounded Christian faith.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> . Mark Galli, *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News is Better than Love Wins* (Carol Streams, IL: Tyndale House, 2011).

<sup>108</sup> Galli, *God Wins*, vii. Emphasis original.

<sup>109</sup> Galli, *God Wins*, vii.

<sup>110</sup> Galli, *God Wins*, ix.

Alcorn argues that the issues are more complex than a doctrinal denial of hell—which is not what Bell does, in any case. He argues that Bell’s project of “radically reinterpreting Christ’s words about hell, stripping them of their straightforward meaning” will lead to a slippery slope of the disappearing core—the centre set of doctrinal necessities that dissipate once one has toyed with this doctrine at the boundary. Alcorn finishes with an appeal to what McFague would argue is logical positivism or foundationalism, a belief that the reader has an innocent eye, that one can simply read the Bible’s truths without the mediation of human experience, without interpretation:

God has appointed us to faithfully deliver his message, not to compose and edit it. He has already written the message—it’s called the Bible. Who are we to spin it and tame it...? God’s position is already taken; we need not apply. We do not own the Christian faith. It isn’t ours to revise. God’s Word wasn’t entrusted to us so we could give it away piecemeal, leaving the next generation with the leftovers. If we go on decade after decade parceling out fragments of the faith, what will be left?<sup>111</sup>

It is a rhetorically powerful plea, and cuts to the heart of the core issue of evangelical definition, and the foundational question of McFague’s project: one’s relationship to the written word. Alcorn’s biblical hermeneutic is the polar opposite of McFague’s.

How, then, can there be lines of continuity between McFague’s theological project and contemporary evangelicalism? What does *Christianity Today* have to do with the *Christian Century*? *Christian Century* editor John Buchanan thinks exudes optimism about the possible connections:

Something new is happening. Denominations are struggling to discover new ways to be church. New partnerships are formed between different Christians who share a common

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<sup>111</sup> Galli, *God Wins*, xi.

sense of mission, and people of every faith are struggling to relate to people of other faiths in a world that has brought us into closer contact than ever before. Within Protestant Christianity, Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are examples of leaders who graciously reach across the old conservative-liberal theological divide to make common cause with others concerned for a just society and an authentic, respectful evangelism.<sup>112</sup>

James Wellman, researcher of American religion, agrees. In his *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity* (2012), he argues that Rob Bell is on the cutting edge of a new American religious perspective. Bell is “slipping a Christian message into secular culture, translating secular thought into Christianity, planting a liberal Christian message into evangelicalism, and taking the passion of the evangelical message into liberal Christianity.”<sup>113</sup> It is Rob Bell, according to Wellman, who sits on the divide between evangelicalism and liberal theologies like Sallie McFague’s. We turn now to Rob Bell’s writings to see the lines of continuity between McFague’s theological project and Bell’s subversive pastoral theology and cultural apologetics.

### *Rob Bell’s Project*

Rob Bell is an evangelical phenomenon. Emerging from a Reformed church background in Michigan, Bell seemed to be following a classical American evangelical leader’s path. He attended Wheaton College as an undergraduate and Fuller Theological Seminary for his MDiv. Following graduate school, he mentored under Grand Rapids mega-church pastor Ed Dobson, who had been an influential member of the Moral Majority before leaving the Christian right to pastor Calvary Church. With about 300 members from Dobson’s Calvary Church, Bell launched

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<sup>112</sup> John M. Buchanan, “Editor’s Desk: Something Game-changing,” *Christian Century* May 17, 2011: 3.

<sup>113</sup> James K. Wellman, Jr., *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012), 20.

a church plant in the late 1990s, which quickly became a mega-church. Throughout the 2000s, Bell was an important inspiration for evangelical church folk, writing books of encouraging, penetrating faith questions like *Velvet Elvis* (2005) and *Sex God* (2008),<sup>114</sup> going on speaking tours like “Everything is Spiritual” and “The God’s Aren’t Angry,” podcasting his sermons to tens of thousands of listeners, and producing the wildly popular spiritual short films called NOOMA. Bell’s evangelical pedigree, context, and influence were secure.<sup>115</sup>

In his assessment of Bell and American religion, Wellman argues in his chapter, “Subversion,” that the entire framework of Bell’s pastoral project was, despite all appearances, a subversive journey.<sup>116</sup> Wellman calls Bell an “Edgeman,” one who lives on the boundaries of culture:

As an “edgeman,” Bell follows the mystical feelings in his heart. Wrenched out of a system to which he can’t relate, and in love with the man Jesus, whom he takes as his “edgeman,” Bell stands against the system—whether it be the religious, political, or social system.<sup>117</sup>

This quotation captures the strange intersection of Bell’s faith. He couples evangelical faith—biblically-centred spiritual theology with the endorsement of leading evangelical figures<sup>118</sup>—with a Christocentric mysticism. That Bell is driven by “the broken-hearted, the ones left behind, and those who have given up hope,”<sup>119</sup> is not out of context for an evangelical pastor. But the tensions that Bell draws out in the last decade test his relationship with evangelicalism. On the

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<sup>114</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>115</sup> See Wellman, *Rob Bell*; Mars Hill, “Rob Bell – Bio,” <http://marshill.org/rob-bell/>.

<sup>116</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 21-43.

<sup>117</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 30.

<sup>118</sup> Rob Bell’s *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), is endorsed by Greg Boyd and Eugene Peterson.

<sup>119</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 27-28.

release of the video promo for Rob Bell's controversial *Love Wins*, leading evangelical, Gospel Coalition leader, and co-founder of the CBMW, John Piper, tweeted simply, "Farewell Rob Bell."<sup>120</sup> Again we face the centre-bounded set tension of evangelicalism. While Bell's pastoral theology is soaked in Biblical reference, Christ-centred, and calls for response to Christ's message and action in the world—the four cardinal characteristics of Bebbington's Quadrilateral—Bell's questions about the afterlife are too far for some. Franklin Graham, the current visionary behind the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse, goes as far as to call Bell a "false teacher" and a "heretic."<sup>121</sup>

In the twenty years of his ministry, Bell has preached hundreds of sermons. Though Bell has published six books that are theological in nature, each are homiletical. For example, *Drops Like Stars: A Few Thoughts on Creativity and Suffering* (2009)<sup>122</sup> is produced in muted colours, filled with symbol-laden art photography, and presented in a format that challenges the genres of the poetic, oral sermon, while prefiguring the screen-based reading experience of later book culture. Moreover, it takes the reader about as long to read *Drops Like Stars* as it would to listen to one of Bell's sermons (about 45 minutes). Each of his books are "oral tradition" in this sense, with short paragraphs, rhythmic breaks, and visual cues to draw the reader into the conversation. Indeed, most of Bell's books are chapbooks in the historical sense, with a 21<sup>st</sup> century aesthetic.

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<sup>120</sup> Tweeted by @JohnPiper Feb 26, 2011, <https://twitter.com/JohnPiper/status/41590656421863424>, last accessed Oct 8, 2013. Bell's book with co-pastor and World Relief activist Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), was no less critical of evangelical norms, but not nearly as influential as *Love Wins*.

<sup>121</sup> Bill O'Reilly Interview with Rev. Franklin Graham, FOX News, April 28, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=gUryOzK90Ks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gUryOzK90Ks). See also Kevin DeYoung's twenty page review of *Love Wins* on the Gospel Coalition's blog, where DeYoung suggests Bell's theology is blasphemy because, reminding us of Bloesch's review of McFague, Bell presents a different god than Reformed orthodoxy; see "God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of 'Love Wins'," Mar 14, 2011, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>.

<sup>122</sup> Rob Bell, *Drops Like Stars: A Few Thoughts on Creativity and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).



Throughout these books, and a number of short films and DVD talks, Bell's theological programme is broad, and largely focussed in pastoral and spiritual theology. While his approach is radically different, the most prominent features of his thought take up the most important themes of Sallie McFague's work. In particular, Rob Bell offers a form of progressive evangelicalism, where the principle of forward motion is biblically-based, challenging the foundationalism of evangelical Christian Bible reading with a postmodern biblical hermeneutic, and drawing out key themes that reconsider the feminine metaphors of God, the place of woman in family, church, and world, and the requirement of the God-believer to reorient himself or herself to the environment.

### *The Progressive Impetus*

We noted above that N.T. Wright critiques progress for progress' sake. His approach in this matter is patently evangelical, even if many evangelicals would disagree with his conclusions (e.g., that egalitarianism will emerge from faithful study of Scriptures). It was J.R.R. Tolkien who critiqued the myth of progress and wondered if, by God's mercy, progress would ever come to an end:

Before them gapes  
the dark abyss to which their progress tends  
if by God's mercy progress ever ends,  
and does not ceaselessly revolve the same  
unfruitful course with changing of a name.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Philomythus to Misomythus," <http://home.ccil.org/~cowan/mythopoeia.html>.

While *Christianity Today* endeavoured to be progressive in social conversations, evangelicals, echoing Tolkien's mistrust, do not value a simple moving forward according to culture's cues. Anything that smacks of Schleiermacher is suspect.<sup>124</sup>

From his first book to his most recent, Rob Bell, in contrast to the instincts of Anglo-American evangelicalism, values progressive God-talk. The dustjacket for *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (2013) asks this question: "Can we find a new way to talk about God?"<sup>125</sup> This question, seemingly a radical one among American evangelicalism, is precisely the thesis question of Bell's earliest book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (2005)—the one which was the basis of his rise as a superstar evangelical leader. Consistent with his imagistic presentation of faith throughout his career, in *Velvet Elvis* Bell uses an artistic image to talk about how we talk about faith, how we do theology. While there are great artists who define artistic schools, there is no definitive, final work of art—it is up to each generation of artists to take up their brushes and paint their own haystacks and sunflowers. Art is a forward-moving endeavour, a journey. For Bell, theology is like this. Each Christian reading *Velvet Elvis* has come from a tradition that has in some way reformed a previous tradition, rediscovering—repainting, if you will—faith for a new context based upon a deeper understanding of Christian Scripture. That repainting does not end with the leaders who began each movement. It is the task of each believer to keep re-interpreting faith for herself. The journey, Bell argues, is what is important: "The very nature of orthodox Christian faith is that we never come to the end. It begs

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<sup>124</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Indeed, the link between Rob Bell and Schleiermacher has already been made among figures we have already met; e.g., see R. Albert Mohler Jr., "We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the (Re)Emergence of Liberal Theology," AlbertMohler.com, Mar 16, 2011, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/03/16/we-have-seen-all-this-before-rob-bell-and-the-reemergence-of-liberal-theology/>. Reflecting conservative evangelical sentiment, Mohler argues that liberals in the tradition of Schleiermacher try to "save Christianity. From a different angle, Wellman also connects Bell with Schleiermacher, *Rob Bell*, 76-77.

<sup>125</sup> Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (New York: HarperOne 2013).

for more. More discussion, more inquiry, more debate, more questions.”<sup>126</sup> To use Roger Olson’s phrase, evangelicals are “Reformed and Always Reforming.”<sup>127</sup>

Bell’s principle in place, the fuller discussion of this progressive element is worked out in more detail eight years later in *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*. If there is a single thesis about God in the book it is that “God is ahead of us.” In Bell’s spiritual theological project, this means two things. First, “God is ahead of us” in the sense that, “God was in this place and I wasn’t aware of it.”<sup>128</sup> This concept of God’s presence, capturing the idea of Jacob awakening in Bethel, or Moses approaching a unconsummate bush, or Paul drawing out the experience of God among pagans on Mars Hill. It is both an ancient and a contemporary experience: “[The Hebrews] believe ... that God is present here, now, among us, upon us.... They talk about the God who is the source of the going-onness of everything.... I believe you are experiencing God in all sorts of ways every day.”<sup>129</sup> The aheadness of Bell’s project is, thus, a Christocentric mysticism as well as a theological programme. Bell begins *What We Talk About* with a quotation from Jane Fonda. When asked by *Rolling Stone* why she would become a Christian, she answered, “I could feel reverence humming in me.”<sup>130</sup> Bell’s entrée into a disbelieving and post-Christian culture is that innate sense of God in and among and “ahead” of each of us.<sup>131</sup>

The second aspect of “God is ahead of us” is the progressive element of theological development. “Ahead” is a step forward, by saying that God is drawing humans forward with

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<sup>126</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). Not all evangelicals are Reformed in the sense of the Calvinist tradition; the Wesleyan stream is a significant force in evangelical conversation.

<sup>128</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 91.

<sup>129</sup> Rob Bell, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNo6ZyigIAY>. Bell goes to suggest that the atheist impulse to reject a God that allows injustice comes from the divine source. See also Bell, *What We Talk About*, 122, “I believe that you are already experiencing the presence of God with you in countless ways every single day.”

<sup>130</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 10.

<sup>131</sup> See esp., Bell, *What We Talk About*, ch. 4, “With”: Rob Bell, “Breathe,” NOOMA video.

God's self into the core realities of God—a God who is loving, present, big. This is Bell's confession:

I believe that God is ahead of us. Pulling us. All of us. Into greater peace, justice, compassion, love, love of enemy. And I believe this divine pull has been acting across human history, pulling all of us—wherever we're at, whatever place and time and country and perspective we come from, I believe that God is always calling all of us into a better future. And you can resist that pull. Our sins and stagnations and fears and secrets—you can resist that as an individual, as a tribe, as a church, as a group—you can in the name of God be outside on the sidewalk missing out on the pull that's happening inside.<sup>132</sup>

In this trajectory Bell has affirmed same-sex marriage, a potentially definitive move for an evangelical in the United States.<sup>133</sup> Speaking in West Hollywood at the Viper room, Bell said that, "some people are gay, and you're our brothers, and you're our sisters, and we love you."<sup>134</sup> In a subsequent interview, Bell said that God is pulling the church ahead into greater affirmation

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<sup>132</sup> Bell, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNo6ZyiglAY>. In this case, "inside" is not just an inversive metaphor but literally inside a conference centre where Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama are tickling one another.

<sup>133</sup> There are some evangelicals who have spoken out in support of LGBTQ rights on various levels. E.g., see Jim Wallace's movement from an affirmation of a traditional view of marriage to leading Sojourners to support "equal protection under the law and full legal rights for all people regardless of sexual orientation," finally affirming same-sex marriage, see Melissa Steffan, "Jim Wallis Now Supports Same-Sex Marriage," *Christianity Today*, Apr 9, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/april/jim-wallis-now-supports-same-sex-marriage.html>; see lesbian Pentecostal pastor Sandra Turnball, *God's Gay Agenda: Gays and lesbians in the Bible, Church and Marriage* (Bellflower, CA: Glory Publishing, 2012); some of the writers among "Red Letter Christians" (<http://www.redletterchristians.org/>) and The Patheos Blog network (<http://www.patheos.com>) support same-sex marriage within church and/or political life.

<sup>134</sup> Jul 24, 2012, <http://apprising.org/2012/08/06/rob-bell-affirms-gay-christians-brian-mclaren-is-really-happy/>. Note that the blogger who posted this video, writes, "Bell and [Brian] McLaren are happy to lie to precious LGBT people, for whom Christ died, leaving them in the bondage of their sin and still under the wrath of God."

of gay people.<sup>135</sup> In San Francisco on Mar 17, 2013, at Grace Cathedral, he was most explicit about his views for the first time:

I am for marriage. I am for fidelity. I am for love, whether it's a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, a man and a man. I think the ship has sailed and I think the church needs.... I think this is the world we are living in and we need to affirm people wherever they are.<sup>136</sup>

While not as explicit on the *What We Talk About* promotional tour, Bell consistently encouraged audiences to imagine not a Christian God who is tagging along behind culture, but one who is inviting the curious believer forward into greater things.<sup>137</sup>

Note the connections between McFague's progressive orientation and Bell's. While Bell speaks of "repainting" the Christian faith, McFague speaks of "re-visioning" or "re-seeing" faith.<sup>138</sup> Again and again, McFague emphasizes the importance of a relevant theology, one that can meet the needs of contemporary culture—in her reading, a culture that finds God incredible and one that faces ingrained sexism and a mounting ecological disaster and nuclear threat. In *Models of God*, McFague focuses her project beyond hierarchical images (i.e., the image of servant and king):

To see God's relationship to the world through the paradigm of the cross of Jesus is illuminating of salvation for our time if neither the servant nor the king is a major model but some other highly significant and very rich metaphors are investigated for their

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<sup>135</sup> Greg Carey, "Rob Bell Comes Out for Marriage Equality," *Huffington Post*, Mar 18, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-carey/rob-bell-comes-gay-marriage\\_b\\_2898394.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000008](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-carey/rob-bell-comes-gay-marriage_b_2898394.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000008).

<sup>136</sup> <http://www.gracecathedral.org/cathedral-life/worship/listen/detail.php?fid=182>.

<sup>137</sup> See Bell, "Hum," ch. 1 of *What We Talk About*, where Bell suggests that as the Oldsmobile was a great car for a certain time, it is not a good car for now; likewise, theology needs to be about the now, and God draws us into that. See also Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, ch. 6.

<sup>138</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 30.

potential as expressions of the destabilizing, inclusive, non-hierarchical vision in an ecological, nuclear age.<sup>139</sup>

McFague writes further on the theological approach of developing a progressive theology:

The material norm of Christian faith involves a specification of what distinguishes this faith. It involves risking an interpretation of what, most basically, Christian faith is about. Such interpretation is, of course, not done in general or for all times; it is always a partial, limited account of the contours of the salvific power of God in a particular time in light of the paradigmatic figure of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>140</sup>

In what we have shared of Bell's approach, McFague would appear to be even more biblically rooted than Bell. It is clear in Bell's preaching and writing that he is drawing people to Jesus in his form of Christocentric mysticism and as the quintessential edgeman, the model of one who turns expectations upside down. But what is the foundation for Bell's theological project? In what way is it connected to the Bible or merely the mystical Jesus-leanings of Bell's heart? After all, evangelicalism in its ideal definitions not just Crucicentric and Activistic, but Biblicistic. Is the Bible the starting point for Bell's theology?

### ***Bell on the Bible***

The key influences in Bell's writing are telling, and one must follow the endnotes of his poetic theology carefully to divine the streams he draws from. In a *Velvet Elvis* endnote, Bell says that, "The best thing I have ever read about the Bible is a transcript of a lecture given by the

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<sup>139</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 56.

<sup>140</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 45-46.

British scholar N. T. Wright called ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’”<sup>141</sup> Frequently mentioned as a significant influence on Bell is Baptist philosopher Dallas Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy*.<sup>142</sup> Bell’s footnotes are filled with the names of artistic and inspirational writers like Anne Lamott, C.S. Lewis, Frederick Buechner, Tim Keller, and Don Miller. But the most significant names that emerge from Bell’s endnotes include a number of biblical scholars, Jewish writers, and theologians, such as Cornelius Plantinga, Walter Brueggemann, Helmut Thielicke, William Webb, Marcus Borg, and, especially, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Tom Holland. These Jewish and Christian thinkers accompany Bell on his journey as he returns not just to Jesus as a mystical, eucharistic figure—which he does—but to a Jewish Jesus of the New Testament, to a God revealed throughout the Scriptures.<sup>143</sup> In this way, then, like McFague, Bell’s theology moves out from the Scriptures to today. He addresses this directly in *What We Talk About*:

So where did I get this idea that God is ahead of us?

I got it from the Bible.

Which I’ve learned, over the years, is surprising for most people to hear. For many in the modern world, the Bible is one of the central reasons for the backwardness of religion.

God is ahead?

And I found that in the Bible?

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<sup>141</sup> N.T. Wright, “How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?”, [http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm). From the 1989 Laing Lecture and Griffith Thomas Lecture; originally published in *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32.

<sup>142</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998).

<sup>143</sup> See Bell and Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, “This book is our attempt to articulate a specific theology, a particular way to read the Bible, referred to by some as a New Exodus perspective. One New Exodus scholar is a British theologian named Tom Holland, who has done pioneering work in this approach. We are grateful to him for his groundbreaking take on the story of Jesus. He has liberated profound truths about what it means to be human, and we celebrate that with him” (7-8). As an example of Bell’s methodology, see *Velvet Elvis*, esp. chs. 3-5, “Yoke,” “Tassels,” and “Dust.” See also the NOOMA video series, which begins with a question or image, then moves back to the Scriptures and the ancient world, and then returns to the initial question or image with a rabbinic style blessing. See, esp., #8, “Dust,” #18, “Name,” and #24, “Whirlwind.”

Yes, and to talk about that, I'll first take you to several of those violent old testament passages, the kind that are generally used as evidence for God being behind. So stay with me, because I want to show you something else at work in those stories, something surprising and compelling that I hope changes the way you understand God.<sup>144</sup>

In a sense, McFague could conclude Bell's chapter, "Ahead," with these words from *Models of God* written a quarter century earlier: "the past is a clue to now."<sup>145</sup>

There are differences between Bell and McFague on their understanding of the Bible. McFague sees the Bible as "classic" rather than "canon."<sup>146</sup> Bell's understanding is more rooted in evangelical approaches to the Bible yet informed by a postmodern hermeneutic. Bell believes that truth comes from various sources and is available to everyone. In *Love Wins*, he asserts that, "None of us have cornered the market on Jesus, and none of us ever will."<sup>147</sup> In the fourth chapter of *Velvet Elvis*, "True," he challenges people to recognize that truth that exists in the world already. Even this approach, however, follows a biblical lead, applying the principle of Philippians 4:8 to his search for truth, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (NIV). Knowing that there is truth in other spaces of human experience, the Bible is about teaching people how to think, discern, engage.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the Bible contains "ultimate truths about the universe [that] are revealed through the stories of particular people living in particular places."<sup>149</sup> And Bell affirms the inspiration of

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<sup>144</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, ebook 75/114. This poetic sequencing is typical of Bell's books.

<sup>145</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 41.

<sup>146</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 5-6.

<sup>147</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 159.

<sup>148</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 86.

<sup>149</sup> Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save*, 7.



the Bible, explaining that, “early in the life of the Jesus movement, certain letters and writings were beginning to distinguish themselves as being different, inspired, ‘from God’ in ways that other religious writings weren’t.”<sup>150</sup> Remembering his Biblicentric context, Bell warns of attitudes that can go along with calling something inspired by God:

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true.... So when I affirm the Bible as God's word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.

In affirming the Bible as inspired, I also have to affirm the Spirit who I believe was inspiring those people to choose those books.<sup>151</sup>

“God has spoken,”<sup>152</sup> Bell asserts, but places that belief within a context of community rather than the individualism of American evangelicalism. Bell moves on, using the image of Jacob wrestling with God that informs much of his theological project, to suggest that we must wrestle with the text. Bell warns, however, that truly wrestling with the text is exhausting, like it was for Jacob, for “when you wrestle with the text, you walk away limping.”<sup>153</sup>

## *Language*

Doubtless Bell disagrees with McFague on what Scripture is while agreeing with the trajectory from the ancient text to a contemporary world that needs new theology. McFague,

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<sup>150</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 67.

<sup>151</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 67-68.

<sup>152</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 69.

<sup>153</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 69.

however, also challenges our access to the written word, reformulating a theory of how one reads the Bible in her project of Metaphorical Theology. What are their points of continuity and discontinuity in how language works?

Bell begins by re-evaluating the place of doctrine and reminding the reader of the disagreement that exists even among those who share the same worldview. The first chapter of *Velvet Elvis*, “Jump,” is a substantial critique of doctrine-centred evangelicalism. In Bell’s metaphor, doctrines are like springs on a trampoline rather than stones that build a wall. Springs are important to a trampoline—essential, even—but they are not the point. Instead of flexible springs needed for the proper use of a trampoline, some build walls of brick. This brick world, what he calls brickianity, makes it seem “as though you have to agree with all the bricks exactly as they are or you can’t join.”<sup>154</sup>

In brickworld, the focus often becomes getting people to believe the right things so they can be ‘in.’ There is often a list of however many doctrines, and the goal is to get people to intellectually assent to these things being true. Once we believe the right things, then we’re in. And once we’re in, the goal often becomes learning how to get others in with us.<sup>155</sup>

Not only is there an exclusivistic, definitive nature to brick world, but the problem with brickianity is also that there is the temptation to reduce God to our definitions:

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<sup>154</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 28.

<sup>155</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 34-35.

The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God. We are dealing with somebody we made up. And if we made him up, then we are in control....<sup>156</sup>

Here we are reminded of McFague's assertion that God is not our words for God.

The critique of a doctrinaire approach to faith comes out of Bell's assertion that, for all he values the historical elements, the Bible is more than historical. What is most true about the Bible is not whether it happened but that it happens. It is true that believers, "have to embrace the Bible as the wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people experience the living God."<sup>157</sup> But that experience is not just an historical record; it is alive in contemporary reality as it is rooted in the past. For Bell, "what gives us strength and meaning and direction is something in addition to the historical events: it is the meaning of these events. Some call this the more-than-literal truth of the Bible. We live in the metaphors."<sup>158</sup>

Bell takes up the impetus of Metaphorical Theology in evangelical interpretation most completely in his *What We Say When We Talk About God*. In his chapter, "Both," which works out his perspectival understanding of language, he applies this nonfoundationalism to the Bible and theology: "So when we talk about God we're using language, language that employs a vast array of words and phrases and forms to describe a reality that is fundamentally beyond words and phrases and forms."<sup>159</sup> Given the limited ability of language, there must also be, "limits to certainty because God, it's repeated again and again, is spirit. And spirit has no shape or form.

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<sup>156</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 25.

<sup>157</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 63.

<sup>158</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 61. It could be that Bell separates truth claims, doctrine of God as theology, and the pragmatic theology of spiritual development—"what gives us strength and meaning." This question is not addressed in Bell's work, but it is possible that the ambivalence is intentional, that for Bell good systematic theology would be good pastoral theology.

<sup>159</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 87.

Spirit, Jesus said, is like the wind. It comes and goes and blows where it pleases.”<sup>160</sup> As if taken from McFague’s books, Bell continues, “Words and images point us to God; they help us understand the divine, but they are not God.”<sup>161</sup> And then, the very next words: “For example, gender.”<sup>162</sup> We will turn to Bell’s “for example” below.

Not only does Bell admit the perspectival nature of human talk, and then move to a Metaphorical Theology, he also moves on as McFague does to create new models of God:

When God is described as father or mother or judge or potter or rock or fortress or warrior or refuge or strength or friend or lawgiver, those writers are taking something they've seen, something they've experienced, and they're essentially saying, “God is like that.” It's an attempt to put that which is beyond language into a frame or form we can grasp. An image of God doesn't contain God, in the same way a word about God or a doctrine or a dogma about God isn't God; it only points to God.<sup>163</sup>

This “frame” is functionally equivalent to McFague’s “models,” and it appears that Bell is attempting to walk that “tortuous route” from image to model. *What We Talk About* is a book of cultural apologetics, so the models are not complete—Bell’s frames are thin. As Bell affirms uncertainty, he also takes up this uncertainty in his Christocentric mysticism: “Whatever we say about God always rests within the larger reality of what we can't say; meaning always resides within a larger mystery; knowing always takes place within unknowing; whatever has been

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<sup>160</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 87.

<sup>161</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 87.

<sup>162</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 87-88.

<sup>163</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 88-89.

revealed to us surrounded by that which hasn't been revealed to us.”<sup>164</sup> And then Bell moves on to speak of teenage girls being kidnapped for the sex trade.

Contrary to Randy Alcorn, then, Bell believes the Bible needs interpretation. As McFague asserts again and again, “there is no innocent eye.”<sup>165</sup> Bell argues that when we talk about, we must acknowledge paradox, mystery, ambiguity, and the realities of our everyday world. One approaches the task of God-talk with the tension of humility and conviction, for “conviction and humility, like faith and doubt, are not opposites; they're dance partners. It's possible to hold your faith with open hands, living with great conviction and yet at the same time humbly admitting that your knowledge and perspective will always be limited.”<sup>166</sup>

Is there any need for theology, however, given the evasive nature of God-talk? Bell argues that there are two reasons why God-talk is essential. First, it is the truth that God is not precisely the definition we assert, but definitions help us move toward God:

They help us put into words the realities beyond words. They give us insight and understanding into the experience of God we're having. Which is why the springs [the doctrines of God] only work when they serve the greater cause: us finding our lives in God. If they ever become the point, something has gone seriously wrong. Doctrine is a wonderful servant and a horrible master.”<sup>167</sup>

Theology integrates the believer into the Jesus experience, connecting him with God, and drawing him into a greater sense of what it means to be human.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 90.

<sup>165</sup> E.g., McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 54-55, 102, etc.

<sup>166</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 93. See also Bell, *Love Wins*, ch. 5.

<sup>167</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 25.

<sup>168</sup> This is the principle that Bell works out in his *Sex God*. He asserts that, “What is anti-human is anti-God,” (19) as humans are made in the image of God—the divine spark of humanity is that image (18). Humans are not God, but neither are they nature, but sit at the nexus between them (18, 24-25; cf. ch. 3). Being “in Christ” draws one into a

Second, biblical theology has a trajectory toward the human in the world. For Bell, God-talk is never just talk. It has practical—and personal—implications. He speaks about his journey toward adopting his current perspective:

What I experienced, over a long period of time, was a gradual awakening to new perspectives on God—specifically, the God Jesus talked about. I came to see that there were depths and dimensions to the ancient Hebrew tradition, and to the Christian tradition which grew out of that, that spoke directly to my questions and struggles in coming to terms with how to conceive of who God is and what God is and why that even matters and what that has to do with life in this world, here and now.<sup>169</sup>

This is why Bell’s grand statements about language and truth always turn to immediate contextual questions of suffering and oppression. It is to this “here and now” that we turn, taking up two important foci of Sally McFague—women and the environment—and looking, briefly, to see how Bell’s particular project of Metaphorical Theology applies itself to these domains that are central to McFague’s own working out of contextual theology.

### *Bell and the Feminine*

It is not possible here to sketch out Bell’s full thoughts on the experience of women. I have already hinted above that Bell moves immediately from a consideration of how we talk

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new humanity, 24, and then works to transform the world according to those principles: “To be a Christian is to work for the new humanity. Jesus commands his followers to feed and clothe and visit and take care of those who need it. They’re fellow image bearers.... A church exists to be a display of the new humanity. A community of people of honor and respect the poor and rich and educated and uneducated and Jew and Gentile and black and white and old and young and powerful and helpless as fully human, created in the image of God” (28). Without this outward focus, we not only denigrate the humanity-divine spark of others, but risk losing it ourselves (28-30). See also Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual*, DVD.

<sup>169</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 9/114.

about God to how we understand gender. In this way he is echoing influences from traditions that make statements like, “If God is male, then male is God.” In his writing and speaking his focus has been to intentionally disorient evangelical and traditionalist expectations, specifically by calling the writer of Hebrews “she,”<sup>170</sup> varying his examples between men and women, and avoiding a pronoun when referring to God.<sup>171</sup>

Early in his ministry at Mars Hill Bible Church, Bell came to an understanding of church leadership that was inclusive of women and men in all places within the church. With his teaching on women in leadership and family and his ordination of female elders, about 1000 people left Mars Hill.<sup>172</sup> This move was just the beginning of Bell’s project to challenge patriarchal structures and traditionalist readings of the Bible. His 2007 book, *Sex God*, reorients many aspects of gender and sexuality that North American evangelicals take for granted. The principle of *Sex God* is that, “You can’t talk about sexuality without talking about how we were made. And that will inevitably lead you to who made us. At some point you have to talk about God.”<sup>173</sup> The book is a barrage of edgy images and inversive claims, beginning with chapter titles themselves: “God Wears Lipstick,” “Sexy on the Inside,” “Leather, Whips, and Fruit,” and “Whoopee Forever.” Throughout he walks the line between sexual asceticism and sexual license,<sup>174</sup> speaks of the sexual power of music,<sup>175</sup> redefines what is sexy,<sup>176</sup> de-sexualizes lust,<sup>177</sup> asserts that someone can be celibate and intrinsically sexual while others can be mechanically sexual without being sexy,<sup>178</sup> and challenges the cultural myth of “God’s ideal for marriage”—a

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<sup>170</sup> Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 101/102, n. 22.

<sup>171</sup> There appears to be no place where Bell explains his choice to avoid the pronoun in respect to God.

<sup>172</sup> <http://www.gracecathedral.org/cathedral-life/worship/listen/detail.php?fid=182>. See Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 39.

<sup>173</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, ch. 2, “Sexy on the Inside,” and ch. 3, “Angels and Animals.”

<sup>175</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 41.

<sup>176</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 41-46.

<sup>177</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, ch. 4, “Leather, Whips, and Fruit.”

<sup>178</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 42-43.

popular phrase in American fundamentalist and evangelical culture. On this last point, he turns these American expectations upside down and asserts the value of singleness, asserting a “higher” view of marriage by speaking of the knit-together nature of sex between any two people, and ends the book admitting the harm that can come when two people risk love. His final story is of divorce, of hurt and wounds rather than carbon copy happy marriages. This rhetorical move is to support a high view of fidelity, that a relationship’s “power is derived from its exclusivity.”<sup>179</sup>

In many ways, Bell’s take on sexuality is still conservative. The fidelity and monogamy he promotes in *Sex God*, and his resistance of a culture of sexual promiscuity, are re-affirmed in his recent statements in support of the LGBTQ community. Remembering Bell’s conservative audience, there is a principle that Bell is employing: Bell argues that we have to rethink what sexuality is. More than the physical pleasure between two people, our sexuality is all of the ways we strive to reconnect with our world, with each other, and with God.”<sup>180</sup> Bell is offering a critique of American culture that is jarring while at the same time opening new doors of understanding to the homosexual community.

Beyond cultural critique, Bell is also offering a substantial critique of his evangelical context. His sixth chapter of *Sex God*, “Worth Dying For,” offers a new reading of one of the key passages of support for a patriarchal understanding of relationships, Ephesians 5. This passage, so long used to justify violence and subjugation in home, church, and society, is easily passed off as a “text of terror.”<sup>181</sup> Rob Bell, in seeing the Bible as in some way true of God, goes to the

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<sup>179</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 139.

<sup>180</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 42.

<sup>181</sup> Phyllis Trible, going to narrative texts, does not actually use Eph 5:21-33 in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).



most difficult texts. He writes of the rape of Tamar,<sup>182</sup> consistently references laws that limit women, and deals here with Eph 5:21-33 in more detail than any passage in his written work.

The principle of his reading is found in the higher value of someone dying in the place of someone else: “people are worth dying for. We know it to be true deep in our bones. And when we see someone actually do it, it’s overwhelming.”<sup>183</sup> When Eph 5 parallels the headship of Christ and the headship of a husband, Bell asks what that headship looks like. The principle is laying down one’s life, self-sacrifice. It is not about power: “In a marriage, you’re talking about power and control only when something central to the whole relationship has fallen apart.”<sup>184</sup> In authentic friendships, we do not invest our time in deciding who has power or control. True friendship is mutual submission, which is the principle of Eph 5:21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (NIV). Bell tells the story of a couple who came into his office for counseling. As Bell watched them argue, the man suddenly turned to him and said, “Look: she won’t submit to me.” Bell’s response was that he was not submitting to his wife. The call for the other to submit is not how a relationship works. Bell finishes the chapter by putting pressure on the male partner in the relationship, reminding him that in Eph 5 there are 47 words in the command to women, and 143 in the commands to men. In short, Ephesians is asking whether men loving “with the kind of love that will go all the way to death if it has to.”<sup>185</sup> Turning on that point, he asks the reader what it would be like to experience that kind of love, ending as he always does on the personal note.

Bell’s reading of Eph 5 and ordination of women are no longer unusual expressions of evangelical doctrine, as demonstrated above, though they are yet to be normative. Bell’s project

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<sup>182</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, 70.

<sup>183</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, 114.

<sup>184</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, 117.

<sup>185</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, 122.

goes farther, however. When noting his reconfiguration of models above, Bell notes both mother and father as ways of saying, “God is like that.” Bell develops those maternal metaphors in his spiritual theology, particularly in his NOOMA video series of short spiritual films, #21, entitled “She.” Using the image of a single mother on a bus between a double shift, Bell encourages the listener to embrace the diversity of our expression of God:

Jesus said that God is Spirit. And Spirit has no shape, it has no form, it has no physical essence. God is in essence beyond male and female. Or perhaps you could say it more accurately: God transcends, and yet includes, what we know as male and female. Like how the Bible begins in this creation poem of Genesis One. It says that God created them male in female; in the image of God they were created.... There is a masculine dimension to God; there is a feminine dimension to God.<sup>186</sup>

Bell, harkening back to his controversial ordination of women a few years earlier, talks about how women were integral to the health and vitality of the early church, quoting Gal 3:26-29, as Christians for Biblical Equality do. In the end, his blessing for the viewer is that he or she may take comfort in this God.<sup>187</sup>

### ***Bell and the Ecological***

As quoted above, Bell uses images of God like, “father or mother or judge or potter or rock or fortress or warrior or refuge or strength or friend or lawgiver.”<sup>188</sup> This list includes models that McFague uses and others that she rejects as irrelevant or idolatrous. But, noticeably absent in this analysis, is “the World as God’s Body.” This eco-theological idea is not developed

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<sup>186</sup> Rob Bell, “She,” NOOMA #21.

<sup>187</sup> See also Bell, *What We Talk About*, 44-45/144, about pg. 92.

<sup>188</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 88-89.

in Bell as it is in McFague. While Bell's teaching on sex roles and models of God are overt, his orientation toward the environment is primarily assumed, presuppositional. Statements of creation care and connection to the environment are spliced through all his written work.

Still, there is explicit teaching on Christians' relationship with their ecological context within Bell's project. His eco-theology works out from two principles, a cosmogenic principle and an eschatological principle—a theological stream that moves out from creation, and one that moves toward the consummation of creation.

First, his understanding of humans-in-nature comes from the same place of his understanding of how one treats others. From the creation of humanity in Gen 1, Bell asserts that humans are fellow “image-bearers”—people with the divine-human spark. His logic moves to suggest that, “How you treat the creation reflects how you feel about the Creator.”<sup>189</sup> This statement should be viewed as a shot across the bow of evangelicals who desire to worship God authentically, but who have little or no concern for the environment. His first principle is that a careless attitude toward the earth reflects a careless attitude toward God; a dominion-centred theology of nature is truly an assertion of human dominion over all realms. In this way, Bell inverts “conservative” expectations of God-talk.

Moving from this creation principle, Bell uses the obvious problems in the environment to signal the fallen nature of the world and the humanity's need of God. In the second chapter of *Sex God*, “Sexy on the Inside,” Bell speaks of being at a Rolling Stones concert, and how the non-Christian couple he sat with spoke of the human brokenness they saw in the world. They instinctively knew something was wrong. Then Bell tells a story of abuse, and then moves quickly to the story of walking with his children along a pristine beach. As the children are wondering around, chasing crabs and skipping stones, they come upon a used syringe. From this

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<sup>189</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 24.

incongruity, Bell argues that we are a generation that alters the environment in which we live rather than adapting to our environment: “we are alienated from the earth,” he says. “It’s easy to go for weeks and maybe even years without ever actually plunging your hands into soil. Into earth. Into dirt.”<sup>190</sup> These two aspects—alienation between humans and alienation between humans and their environment—are the theological implications of the fall in Genesis 3, the curse we live with as humans. It is a poignant point for Bell:

There’s no better way to understand how disconnected we are from our environment than to ask the big metaphysical question, the question that has challenged the great minds of our generation and the generations before us, the question that if we had a clear answer for it, would unlock the deepest mysteries of life on this planet:

Where does our trash go?<sup>191</sup>

And then he returns to his controversial: the way one treats the creation reflects the way one feels about God.

The second principle of Bell’s eco-theology is eschatological.<sup>192</sup> Throughout his work, Bell propagates both a realized eschatology and an eschatology of re-creation. His realized eschatology began in *Velvet Elvis* and comes to fruiting in *Love Wins*. In his earliest book, Bell argues that,

if there is a life of heaven, and we can choose it, then there’s also another way. A way of living out of sync with how God created us to live. The word for this is “hell,” a way, a

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<sup>190</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 37.

<sup>191</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 37.

<sup>192</sup> Bell is following N.T. Wright’s understanding of Jewish eschatology, see *New Testament and the People of God* (Vol. 1: Christian Origins and the Question of God; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 268-279.

place, a realm absent of how God desire things to be. We can bring heaven to earth; we can bring hell to earth.<sup>193</sup>

Bell argues in the first chapter of *Sex God*, thinking incongruously of concentration camps in WWII and the sexual objectification of the other, that heaven and hell are about the reign of God on earth, and he leaves the reader to decide whether she will bring heaven or hell to earth.<sup>194</sup> In chapter two of *Love Wins*, “Here is the New There,” Bell critiques the Christian idea of heaven as “someplace else.” Heaven is the space where God’s will is done, where “then” becomes “now.” In this way God drags the future into the present. For Jesus, this new kind of life in him is not about escaping this world but making it a better place, here and now. The goal for Jesus is not getting into heaven. The goal is to get heaven here. When Jesus talked about heaven, Bell asserts, he talked about, “our present eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come.”<sup>195</sup>

The “now” aspect of Bell’s ethical response to eschatology is a simple step of logic. Given the intricate connections humans have with their environment—recall that both evangelical groups battling over the environmental issue admitted the connection of oppression of the poor with the response to the environmental crisis—part of bringing heaven to earth, of dragging the future into the present, is the project of creation care. But this project is deepened in Bell’s logic of an eschatology of re-creation. Beginning with “New” and “Good,” the sixth and seventh movements of *Velvet Elvis*, Bell makes the connection between our care of creation and the re-creation he envisions in the age to come—heaven coming to earth as pictured in Rev 21-22. All of life is a moving toward the great re-creation of the consummation of all things. This

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<sup>193</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147.

<sup>194</sup> Bell, *Sex God*, 19-30.

<sup>195</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 58-59.

re-creation is the essentially human project: “In Jesus, God is putting it all back together.”<sup>196</sup> Harkening his cosmogenic environmentalism, Bell says that, “Everyone’s an environmentalist. We cannot live independently of the world God has placed in us. We are intimately connected. By God.”<sup>197</sup> This cosmogenic-creation environmentalism moves naturally to eschatological-new creation environmentalism, as Bell sees new creation not as just a return to the garden, but as building something new: “Not only are we connected with creation, but creation is going to move forward.”<sup>198</sup> This movement, from paradisiacal garden to heavenly city, informs the ethical response of the believer to do good to that which God has made good.

## Considering Bell and McFague Together

Bell’s ethical outworking of a progressive, Biblically-founded, Christocentric mysticism works itself into his feminine and eco-theology, and is captured in the penultimate chapter of Bell’s most recent book:

It is possible for religious people who see themselves as God’s people to resist the forward-calling of God to such a degree that the larger culture around them is actually ahead of them in a particular area, such as the protection of human dignity or the integration of the mind and body or the treatment of women or inclusion of the forgotten and marginalized or compassion or intellectual honesty or care for the environment.<sup>199</sup>

It is true that this is not McFague’s “World as God’s Body.” This is one model that Bell does not use. And while McFague is avoiding immanentizing God, the concept of the World as God’s

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<sup>196</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 161.

<sup>197</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 158.

<sup>198</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 158.

<sup>199</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 159.s

Body would likely, in Bell's view, be just that, a drawing of God too near to the human experience. Yet Bell's God is intimately close—the completely other and already here—and he seeks to break the trajectory of Christian experience that is damaging to the environment. Instead, in Bell's project, the believer rises out of the mystical Jesus experience and immediately turns to the experience of the marginalized. When a follower of Bell's theology sees the Creator, she will immediately see the creation.

McFague's evocation of God as Mother is far more complex than including biblical images of the feminine, and moves beyond maternal metaphors to include broader female images. Doubtless that McFague would critique Bell's approach, including his withdrawal from male pronominal use with reference to God. "If we refuse to use any pronouns for God," McFague argues, "we court the possibility of concealing androcentric assumptions behind abstractions."<sup>200</sup> For McFague, speaking of God in feminine and masculine terms rather than female and male terms will always disappear into cultural attributions of femininity and masculinity.

Note Bell's audience, though. While his books are increasingly apologetic, aiming at a Spiritual but Not Religious and post-Christian America, the evangelical movement which is his primary context for his spiritual conversation is not just enriched by biblical images of God that are predominantly male, but have a complicated matrix of reactions to feminist theologies that cut to the heart of their faith foundations. Leaving aside symbolic barriers between feminism and evangelicalism, like social policy on abortion or conceptions of family life, feminist theology cuts to the cardinal identity markers of what it means to be evangelical. For example, McFague offers a non-incarnational Christology, and therefore a non-exclusivistic path to God, cutting to the heart of evangelical Crucicentrism and Conversionism. She considers the Bible as classic, not

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<sup>200</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 99.

canon, critiquing evangelical Biblicism as Bibliolatry. And the fourth cardinal identity marker of evangelicalism in Bebbington's Quadrilateral, Activism, falls in McFague's *Metaphorical Theology*, as she notes that the kind of theological project evangelicals pursue excludes women and creates cultural distance. The critique of McFague and other feminist theologians cuts to the heart of what it means to be evangelical.<sup>201</sup>

McFague is invested in a programme to critique idolatry. But so is Bell, though his starting points for theology are different, as are the cultural and ecclesial context into which he speaks. The ecological and gender questions have moved forward since McFague began; it is partly due to McFague, perhaps, that the zeitgeist has shifted. McFague's theology as a "theology for today" would, by necessity shift.

Whether or not Bell faithfully carries McFague's project into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is almost certain that Bell has not read McFague. In none of Bell's writings does he ever reference McFague or other prominent feminist theologians. This may be because of the sensitive symbolic value of feminist theology for American evangelicals; for some of the audience Bell would like to engage with his New Creation, New Exodus, progressive, egalitarian, ecologically-connected spiritual theology, a single reference to a feminist theologian would signal that Bell is not to be trusted.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, for that reason Bell may not have encountered Sallie McFague's work. There is no reason, however, to believe that Bell had anything more than a passing knowledge of McFague's specific project or the larger conversation of feminist theology.

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<sup>201</sup> For many of the same critiques, see Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*.

<sup>202</sup> Indeed, Bell did pay a price for recommending Marcus Borg's work. See this expose, Ken Silva, "Marcus Borg and Rob Bell: The Bible is not a Divine Produce with Divine Final Authority?", Apprising Ministries, <http://apprising.org/2009/04/17/marcus-borg-and-rob-bell-the-bible-is-not-a-divine-product-with-divine-final-authority/>. Or, in this expose, Bell's teaching is lined up to typical liberal thinkers from Schleiermacher to McFague: Justin Stratis, "Rob Bell is Totally a Liberal," blogos asarkos: a theological echo chamber, <http://www.blogosasarkos.com/?p=74>. It should be noted that Bell does footnote feminists, like Anne Lamott, and a number of egalitarian Christians.



How does one account for the connections? Like McFague, and despite coming from a dramatically different ecclesial culture, Bell begins with the principle of a theology for today in conversation with Scripture, uses a perspectival nonfoundationalist approach to reading, and engages in key points of McFague's prophetic calling, like a reconsideration of the Christian's relationship with the environment and the role of gender in church and culture. Granted significant differences, why are there such connections between their projects?

It is possible that Bell's project could be simply the result of his insistence of a culturally relevant theology and a shift in the cultural zeitgeist. In the culture Bell would seek to make the gospel relevant, there is a greater awareness of issues surrounding gender and sexuality, the environment, and even the idea that there is "no innocent eye"—all of the McFague links in Bell's project. Yet, in tension with that very culture, Bell continues to speak as a critic. *Sex God* is as much a critique of American popular understanding of sexuality as it is evangelical self-critique. *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* contains blistering criticisms of America as empire. And in *Love Wins*, Bell asserts that heaven has "flames," speaking to the difficult project of becoming the kind of person who would recognize heaven.<sup>203</sup> And, perhaps most importantly, Bell speaks of Jesus:

I'm a Christian, and so Jesus is how I understand God. I realize that for some people, hearing talk about Jesus shrinks and narrows the discussion about God, but my experience has been the exact opposite. My experiences of Jesus have opened my mind and my heart to a bigger, wider, more expansive and mysterious and loving God who I believe is actually up to something in the world.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> See Bell, *Love Wins*, esp. ch. 3.

<sup>204</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 14.

This is Bell's first "truth" about this book. The second truth demonstrates that Bell is not just accommodating to culture, but using cultural questions as a starting point to draw people into conversation about a God who is represented somehow in Jesus, who is different than and yet connected to the belief of God in culture, and who ultimately requires an ethical response to creation:

Second, what I've experienced time and time again is that people want to talk about God. Whether it's what they were taught growing up or not taught, or what inspires them or what repulses them, or what gives them hope or what fills them with despair, I've found people to be extremely keen to talk about their beliefs and lack of beliefs in God. What I've observed is that while we want more of a connection with the reverence humming within us, we often don't know where to begin or what steps to take or what that process even looks like.

In his project of cultural apologetics, the "humming," that sense of God in experience, is only the starting point. Bell intends to take them further.

So the links between McFague and Bell cannot merely be that McFague is prescient in the upcoming social revolution, or a party to it. Conservative Southern Baptist Albert Mohler, as noted above, thinks that Bell is becoming a liberal, and so Bell would naturally think liberal thoughts. He is not the first to do so, and will not be the last, given the powerful symbolic value that "liberal" has—as Randy Alcorn's preface to *Gardening Eden* attests.<sup>205</sup> In a simplistic

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<sup>205</sup> It should be noted that in his preface to *God Wins*, Alcorn does not call Bell a liberal, but does say he has gone beyond "common belief." Mark Driscoll, a conservative mega-church pastor, writes of three kinds of emerging church leaders—that movement that much of recent evangelical conversation has considered: 1) *Relevants* are "theologically conservative evangelicals"<sup>205</sup> who do not reshape theology but update style and language, including people like *Vintage Christianity* author Dan Kimball, *Blue Like Jazz* author Donald Miller, and Rob Bell; 2) *Reconstructionists* are evangelicals dissatisfied with church form and spiritual practice, such as missional church leaders Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch; and 3) *Revisionists* "are theologically liberal and question key evangelical

distinction of right-left, such a move toward the left would be in keeping with Bell's progressive approach, his repainting of Christian faith. Moreover, this shift would not be unwelcome.

*Christian Century* editor John Buchanan was optimistic about this shift, and I have taken pains to include a number of key evangelical thinkers who are not limited by the word "liberal" as an evangelical boundary marker and who include liberal Christian theologians among their conversation partners. Bell is one of a growing number of evangelicals willing to do so.

But is Rob Bell a "liberal?" One of Bell's earliest biographers, James Wellman, considers the question. He says that Bell is a radical, an "edgeman" "planting a liberal Christian message into evangelicalism."<sup>206</sup> Wellman, however, warns about labelling Bell as a liberal. Bell eschews the label as well, calling labels boring and essentially missing the point.<sup>207</sup> But, in Wellman's words, "is Bell brining a liberal Protestant Trojan Horse into the house of Reformed American evangelicalism?"<sup>208</sup> Wellman's "resounding no" is based on his assertion that Bell is as much an opponent of "the closed-minded nature of liberalism" as the "myopic sensibilities" of conservative Protestants.<sup>209</sup> Bell's goal, is for a more complex, holistic understanding of Christian faith.

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doctrines, critiquing their appropriateness for the merging postmodern world," such as controversial *Generous Orthodoxy* author Brian McLaren, as well as Doug Pagitt, Senior Fellow of Emergent Village. In this conversation, particularly in Bell's questions about the afterlife and his advocacy for same-sex marriage, Driscoll would see Rob Bell as moving from the theologically conservative "relevants" category to the theologically liberal "revisionists" category with Brian McLaren. See Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3/2 (Spring 2006): 89. For a sample of writings in the emerging church vein, see Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), which includes essays by Dan Kimball, Brian D. McLaren, and Samir Selmanovic. See also Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today*, Jan 19, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html>; Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>206</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 20.

<sup>207</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 77.

<sup>208</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 77.

<sup>209</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 77. It is worth noting that Wellman is one of the Patheos bloggers.

So it is no surprise that Bell not only rejects the label of “liberal,” but also that of “evangelical.”<sup>210</sup> Rather than lump Bell into the liberal camp, Wellman argues that Bell is a prophetic voice for a new kind of faith perspective: “The face of American Christianity is in transition, and Rob Bell, with his own evolving look and artistry, has opened a window on this hybrid horizon.”<sup>211</sup> As one blogger, David Opderbeck, phrased it, “The ‘Liberal/Evangelical’ divide is a product of a bygone time—and it is good that this time has passed. The coalition that birthed *Christianity Today* is dissipated. Thoughtful ‘evangelicals’ today are post-liberal and post-conservative....”<sup>212</sup> For Wellman, citing evangelicals like Greg Boyd and Eugene Peterson as support, Bell is birthing a renaissance in Christian thinking.<sup>213</sup>

It is possible that Bell is on the cusp of an emerging social movement. Bell critic and *Christianity Today* editor, Mark Galli, insists that, even after *Love Wins* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, Bell remains the quintessential evangelical.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, in 2009 interview with Galli, Rob Bell said, “I am not doing anything new. I am hoping that I’m in a long tradition.”<sup>215</sup> Yet, in tension with that “long tradition” is the progressive element of his faith, in which Bell believes he is following Jesus both in principle and practice. In doing so, he recognizes the radical nature of his project. He admits in *What We Talk About* the danger of this approach: “The great German scholar Helmut Thielicke once said that a person who speaks to this hour’s need will always be skirting the edge of heresy, but only the person who risks those heresies can gain the truth.”<sup>216</sup> The danger may, indeed, be too great. Galli calls Bell the

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<sup>210</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 142.

<sup>211</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 2.

<sup>212</sup> David Opderbeck, “Mark Galli, I think, Doesn’t Really Get It,” Through a Glass Darkly blog, Mar 14, 2011, <http://www.tgdarkly.com/blog/?p=1877>.

<sup>213</sup> Wellman, *Rob Bell*, 18.

<sup>214</sup> Galli, “What We Talk About,” 35.

<sup>215</sup> Mark Galli, “The Giant Story: Rob Bell on Why He Talks About the Good News the Way he Does,” *Christianity Today* (April 2009), 36.

<sup>216</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 4.

quintessential evangelical not because Bell is the best of evangelical perspectives, but because Bell represents the loss of biblical foundationalism, a religion based on human experience of God. For Galli, that is a project that is anemic in key ways.<sup>217</sup>

Whether or not he is the bellwether of a new American Christianity or merely an evangelical heretic—an evangelical exile in the land of liberal—this past-forward tension is the crux of Bell’s project, and ultimately the reason why there is continuity between Bell and McFague. They are mutually oriented in their task of a theology for today. With a shared Biblical hermeneutic that admits human limitation, and with the pressing needs of culture, neither abandons the Bible. With an understanding of metaphor and poetry, each emerges from the task of biblical engagement with words that speak into pressing cultural conversations like the environment or the role of women. Finally, the connection between McFague and Bell may signal a shrinking divide between the divergent Protestant streams represented by *Christianity Today* and the *Christian Century*. The result, if Bell is part of a larger subculture and if he remains influential within evangelicalism, will return us once again to the question of evangelical definition.

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<sup>217</sup> Galli, “What We Talk About,” 35-39.