



## **Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived**

*Rob Bell*

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## **Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived** Rob Bell

*In Love Wins*, bestselling author, international teacher, and speaker Rob Bell (*Velvet Elvis, Drops Like Stars*) addresses one of the most controversial issues of faith—hell and the afterlife—arguing, would a loving God send people to eternal torment forever?

Rob Bell is an electrifying, unconventional pastor whom *Time* magazine calls “a singular rock star in the church world,” with millions viewing his NOOMA videos.

With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial with a hopeful message—eternal life doesn’t start when we die; it starts right now. And ultimately, *Love Wins*.

## **Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived** Details

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# From Reader Review Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived for online ebook

## Mike says

Can a book be valuable, even though most people reading it don't agree with its philosophy or conclusions?

Can a book be valuable, even if the writer is flawed in his editing process, his debating skills and his rhetorical approach?

Most people have predictable reaction to books they don't agree with. First, they don't recommend that others read the book. Second, they find as many people as possible who also don't agree with the book and mutually trash it. Third, they refuse to see any value in the individual parts because they reject the book as a whole. This is a classic blunder to make with books. The most insidious viewpoint to hold onto is one you will never challenge or allow others to challenge. That implies you are not willing to be wrong or to be shown how you are wrong. The greatest false beliefs are those which go unchallenged for a long time. Truth can always withstand the scrutiny of examination. That's why the Bible has been around for so long.

Rob Bell is a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is claimed by others, but not by Mr. Bell, that he is part of two movements within Christianity: the Postmodern and the Emerging Church movements. I cannot confirm or deny either of those claims. He has written a book called "Love Wins", which has been challenged and vilified in many places on the Internet. The book is an examination of the belief in Hell, and in God's punishment for sin. I expect there will be thousands of such book reviews coming. The book was marketed in a controversial way and as such was already condemned even before it was published.

I'll be clear. There is much I don't like about the book myself. But I will leave the critical examination to others. I want to be that 'other' voice in this sea of opinion. I want to list what I believe are the best parts about this book. I do this so that even those who disagree with Rob Bell will stop for just a moment and consider that God may have prompted him to write it. I don't mean it is inspired or even full of truth. But God can still nudge along someone to write something, even if that person is not completely accurate. Who of us are?

### The Most Valuable Parts of the Book, "Love Wins"

1. He asks great questions. He asks the kind of questions that church leaders hope non-believers never ask. These are thoughtful, direct and well-crafted questions. They are designed to attack the doctrines of hell and God's wrath in such a way that we have to start from scratch in deciding why we believe the things we do. Here are some examples of the hundreds of questions he asks:

Why does God tell us we have to forgive everyone, including our enemies, and then He doesn't do the same with sinners going to hell?

Does God punish people for infinite amount of years with eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life?

How does a person end up being part of the lucky few who don't go to hell? Chance? Luck? Random Selection? Being born in the right place at the right time in history in the right family, speaking the right language?

Is there no hope for someone who dies and is not a believer?

What is the age of accountability? What happens if a person dies a day before that age? Does he go to

heaven? What happens if he dies the day after that age? Does he go to hell?

What EXACT prayer does one have to pray to get into heaven? What if we get the wording wrong? What about people who have prayed some version of the prayer? Or any prayer? Do they get in for making an effort to talk to God?

Is Hell the best God can do with the unbelievers?

So does the kind of person you are not really matter as long as you have prayed the right prayer or believed the right things?

Can a good person who doesn't pray the prayer and a bad person who keeps doing bad things after the prayer go to heaven and hell respectively?

Do we have to care about this world if it's just going to be destroyed anyway?

What if the only person who ever shared Jesus with you was the man who beat you up every day and then sang hymns while he did it? Do you get to escape hell because the example of a believer was so bad?

Can you do anything to receive God's grace? If you have to believe, is it really grace?

What about the guy whose sins were forgiven because of the faith of his friends who let him down through the roof with a rope? Does the faith of someone who knows you count? If it doesn't, why did Jesus tell him his sins were forgiven?

2. He Doesn't Believe Hell is a Single Issue: For instance, there is no doubt that Rob Bell believes in hell. He says it three times in the book that he believes there is a hell. But then he separates the issue. His questions (and perhaps his own struggles) relate to issues like "Who will go to hell" and "how long will hell last?" and "Will God ever give those in hell another chance?" For a long time in the Christian Church, these issues were all wrapped together in one package: We were told if we mess with one part of the package it spoils the whole lot. But some of the current beliefs in the evangelical church about hell borrow more from Dante's "Inferno" than the Bible. Bell makes the case that these ideas need to be discussed and challenged.

3. He Shows us the Value of Dialogue alongside Systematic Theology: Modernists are those who like to have neat and tidy categories for everything. Post-moderns believe that it is always premature to decide on what truth really is until we have all the facts. Since we are never sure we have all the facts, we need to be careful about being overly dogmatic. In this book, his stated intention is to throw open the discussion on hell, heaven and divine punishment so that all the implications and questions can be asked and the answers dissected for accuracy. Most modernists like to have their beliefs wrapped up and decided upon so they are not open to challenge. Debate perhaps, but not challenged. It used to be that several doctrines were considering too sacrosanct to ever question. The doctrine of Atonement (the belief about what happened on the cross to our sin and how it affects us now); the doctrine of the Bible (i.e. whether it is God's Word or man's invention); The doctrine of the Trinity (a belief that God is one being in three persons) and the doctrine of the church (i.e. its legitimacy and form). If one questioned or differed on these doctrines, then they could be dismissed as wrong and heretical. Added to that list is the doctrine of Hell. Without a proper understanding of hell, the atonement, the trinity, the church and the Bible, one is considered outside the barriers of good theology. But if you study church history, you'll come to realize that all these doctrines were debated in their day and survived. The earliest was the Trinity. Then came Atonement. Then the Church (it's still being debated), and then the Bible. The only one that has not been seriously discussed by the most conservative elements of the church is Hell. Why? It is strongly believed if there is any softening of the position on hell, it will destroy the last reason we do evangelism. After all, if there is no hell, then why witness to someone? Yet, witnessing to people has almost become extinct in today's church. Few individuals do any evangelism and we still maintain a conservative view on hell. So perhaps Rob Bell's book will foster enough reaction so his questions will not be swept under the carpet.

4. The discussion on the word "Eternal". Bell focuses much of his thesis about hell on the interpretation of one word: aion. It is the word often (though not always) interpreted "eternal". In John 3:16 when it says

those who believe in him will “not perish, but have eternal life”, the Greek word there for eternal is aion. Even though I think he does a less than acceptable job interpreting this word, he does right to question our understanding of it. The primary meaning is not “forever”. It does mean eternal, but not in the sense of time. More in the sense of permanency. Eternal life is also a quality of life and not just a reference point in time. God has eternal life with him and not just in the sense that he is eternal. We can never be eternal like God since we have a beginning point. So, I applaud Rob Bell for bringing this word to our attention. I await better scholars and more able communicators to tackle that word before I feel satisfied what it means.

What I don't appreciate about the book can be summed up in two ideas.

First, he starts with what he considers the logical end game for God (i.e. God's love will win everyone over) and then figures out how the Bible can end up there. That is turning the issue on its head. His logic and hermeneutics (the study of how we learn from the Bible) are not skilled and what comes out is a very complicated end-product. Most people reading this book will get lost in the vagaries of the theological machine he is riding.

Second, his Narrative viewpoint is not consistent. Mainly, he interprets the parables of Jesus as if they are part of the story being told by God to man. The Narrative approach believes that we must understand where the story was when Jesus taught and not where it is today. God is not telling the story the same way today. I understand that approach. But then, in a number of places in the book, he stops interpreting narratively and uses different Bible verses as “proof-texts”, reverting back to a modernist way of proving a point. I wish he had stuck with one approach or the other.

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## **Books Ring Mah Bell says**

I had to pick up this book and read it for a few reasons: Controversy and debate.

Rob Bell has his Mars Hill Church in my town. I know people that attend his church and love it there. I have heard so very much about this book, and thought the controversy was localized, but then I saw Mr. Bell's idea of No Hell on the cover of Time magazine.

When I picked the book up and brought it to the register, the cashier glared at it, then at me. (GLARED, I tell you!) She then launched into a lecture of sorts about "false prophets" and leading people to question things. (oooh boy!) I didn't have the heart to tell her most days I'm an atheist. I should have. Just for fun.

Certainly, I am in no position to get in a theological debate. I have not studied the bible intensely, but I do love the debate, and love to see the ways people interpret what they have read. That is what Bell does in this book. He lists all sorts of places in the bible where love wins, where God is love.

I love Mr. Bell's take on love winning. From early on, I was often told I would be going to hell unless I was "saved". That really bothered me, not from fear, but from a "what kind of God would do that?" standpoint. What about those unaware, never exposed to Christianity? (As Rob says, "what if the missionary got a flat tire?") It was then that I washed my hands of religion. What kind of God would send people to an eternity of torment for just not being exposed to "the word"? Or being introduced to it and having questions? I mean, HE gave us the brain to think and question... then He's going to punish us for that?

Makes no sense.

I love the message.

God is loving.

Love.

What Rob Bell states is what I *want* to believe, on the days I believe in anything.

The book is written like a speech, and while I believe it would have been great as a sermon, the format falls flat as a book.

My curiosity has been satisfied, and I was not outraged. I can, however, see where the book would upset those that believe being saved is the only way.

I give him credit for doing what most religions dare not allow: question.

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### **Jay Miklovic says**

This book was not altogether horrible, and there were a few paragraphs here and there that were commendable. I certainly agree with Rob's optimistic assessment of 'the end times' and find that to be a refreshing departure from the depressing and unbiblical eschatology so popular in American Fundamentalism.

As far as style... The style of the book was at least unique, which is rare in a work like this.

But.

I found the style to be.

Annoying mostly.

Entirely.

Not only because of choppiness.

but.

because.

I.

Paid.

For.

a.

200 page book.

That was mostly.

white space.

white space.

white space.

However it was unique, and I do appreciate uniqueness.

So why the one star? Mostly because of the theology, but not entirely. I found Brian McLaren's "New Kind of Christianity" to be bad theology as well, but I willingly gave it three stars because he intelligently defended his views. With McLaren you could respect his mind, and you could not merely dismiss him without first dealing with his claims. Bell's book, well, not so much. There was little need to deal with any of his points, because he made so few.

The rendering of the prodigal son story was tragic. The usage of the rock in the wilderness story was tragic. Almost every quotation from Paul was tragic. Everything was blown out of context with no respect to the actual flow of the scriptures or the arguments of the apostle Paul or other biblical writers. After thinking some about this book and trying to get to the foundation of it I would say that ultimately this book sets itself up as a polemic against penal substitution, Jesus dying because of, and for our sin.

The other frustrating part of the book, along with the drama surrounding its release is how the Bell uses questions. The book with its constant barrage of questions essentially puts substitution on the witness stand and then badgers it with a 1000 questions giving it no time to answer. The assessments that many have made that "Bell is just asking the right questions" and "he is not advocating Christian Universalism" are bogus assessments. Questions are almost never neutral, and the questions he asks are not neutral. Asking questions is a great way to get your point across, cheezy Gospel tracts that look like \$1000 bills do the same thing. I have no problem with using questions to make a point, I do have a problem with readers and authors acting like questions are always innocent or neutral.

Finally, I have heard so many people say "Read the book first, then express your opinion". Well I did that, but it probably wasn't necessary. Bell himself affirms that he says nothing in this book that hasn't been said before. I whole heartedly concur with his own assessment.

Bottom line. This book is like classic universalism dressed in skinny jeans and wearing trendy thick rimmed glasses.

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### **Jared Totten says**

Forgive me. I couldn't resist writing this in my best Bell-style prose.

In this whole whirlwind that Rob Bell has stirred up, there is one group that has been conspicuously absent from the wide net of universalism that he and others have cast out.

One group that has been neglected.

Ignored.

And they cry out for their just defense.

I speak of course about Satan and the demons.

After all, if God is a God of love, and if he loves all of his creation, and if he wants to see it all brought into shalom, and if God will indeed reconcile all things unto himself, and if no temporary rebellion is worthy of eternal punishment—well then why not? But let me put it in Bell's own words:

"At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners" will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.

"And so, beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will

ultimately restore everything and everybody, because Jesus says in Matthew 19 that there will be a "renewal of all things," Peter says in Acts 3 that Jesus will "restore everything," and Paul says in Colossians 1 that through Christ "God was pleased to . . . reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Bell, 107)."

We're told more (and more often) about the final state of rebellious human beings than we are about the final state of the demons. Especially by Jesus. So if God's love overcomes all that has been revealed about judgment toward fallen humanity, certainly it can do the same for the demons.

But if.

If one accepts the reality of wicked, fallen spiritual beings whose rebellion is as continuous and ongoing into eternity as their existence . . .

If one accepts the reality of a just judgment and eternal confinement and punishment of such beings . . .

. . . well then demons aren't the only ones who fit that description and deserve that end. It would seem to me that demons—more so than "those who have never heard"—have the better argument for the unfairness of the Gospel (since it in no way, shape, or form is available to any of them). Yet I don't hear anyone fighting that theological battle.

So can we expect Love Wins II: Stryper Was Wrong\* any time soon?

Of course not. Because even though it's logically consistent with Bell's reasoning as to why all humans will be saved, that's just not good PR for the universalist camp. Or perhaps Rob doesn't actually believe that God's love wins out over all resistance and redeems all hard hearts.

Rob, for a universalist, that's not very inclusive of you.

\*Sorry, that was probably a very obscure reference for many of you. Stryper had a hit album called To Hell With the Devil.

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### **Lyn says**

Controversial without going over the top (though many would argue with me - many who no doubt have not and will not actually read the book).

Got a chance to see him speak, fascinating!

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### **Sarah Rosenberger says**

Right now, it's hard to avoid the controversy that is surrounding this book. After being rejected by the Christian publishing powerhouse Zondervan for not conforming to its values, Love Wins was ultimately

published by a secular company. Before the book was even released, conservative Christians were calling the author a heretic, a universalist, and a false prophet peddling a book that would lure people away from Christ and toward an eternity in hell. That's a pretty impressive feat for a 200 page book that raises more questions than it answers.

Many of his critics will grudgingly admit that Bell paints a great picture of Christianity; over and over, he shows it as a religion centered around loving one another as Jesus loved. To Bell, Christianity is more accurately reflected in the life of a person working in a refugee camp in a war zone than it is in the life of someone passing out tracts that promise eternal damnation unless one prays a certain prayer to Jesus.

This book explores the concepts of heaven, hell, and who really ends up being "saved". As Bell points out, he's not the first one to discuss these issues, and *Love Wins* is probably best appreciated as a starting point that introduces issues that can be further researched. Bell has claimed that this book is couched in orthodoxy, and it's true that there are scores of bible verses included along with quotes from religious thinkers like Aquinas and Luther, but it can't be denied that this book ultimately seems to claim that everyone who wants to spend eternity with God can and will, even if they don't find the right path until after death. It also seems to say that hell is more often a self-created prison here on earth than it is a literal lake of fire. Finally, heaven is viewed as not simply a distant reward for the faithful, but as something that can and should be worked towards attaining every day, in this world, not only the world to come.

I wish there had been citations instead of a "Further Reading" list, and sometimes Bell's writing style can get a little obnoxious, but despite that, I found this book moving and convincing; probably because it fleshed out (through bible verses, examples, metaphors and probing questions) what I already leaned towards believing. Personally, I think all biblical interpretations are subject to human error, but as Bell points out, "some stories are better than others." Love it or hate it, agree with it or consider it heresy, but it's hard to deny that the story Bell tells in *Love Wins*, of a good God who ultimately saves all of creation and creates a heaven on earth, is a really good story.

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### **Bradly J says**

Zero stars. I found this book to be very distasteful. Let me qualify this. I have no argument with the idea of a loving God, that idea is entirely biblical. However, after carefully pointing out that he has referenced every verse with the words hell, hades, and sheol, I found most of Matthew 25 to be conspicuously absent (no mention of "everlasting punishment prepared for the devil and his angels). Also missing is any mention of the lake of fire. Hell is treated as little more than a mental state which people create for themselves. The holiness of God is mentioned once in the book, and seemed to me to have been seriously downplayed and, as a result, sin doesn't seem all that sinful here.

There are places in the book where Bell's verbage in comments relating to Christians and historic biblical doctrine seemed unnecessarily sarcastic and mocking.

The overall tone of the book seems to give the ultimate importance and supremacy of relevance to one's own experiences, rather than to objective truth, which is thoroughly postmodern.

In general, Bell uses a lot of generalisations and glosses over certain details that are crucial to the subjects of sin and salvation, heaven and hell. He is careful, however, to warn against the evil of being in any way critical of theological perspectives one does not share.

My question is this: if hell is little more than a psychological construct and if God really doesn't mind so much if someone sins a few times over a span of a few years, then what reason could there be for Jesus' death and resurrection, or even for His incarnation?

(10-21-2011)

One further thought which I forgot to include before. I have noticed a tendency in the writings of Bell (and other emergent writers), especially in this book, to place a great deal of focus on questions. While I have no major objection to questions (they do have a purpose), there is also such a thing as an answer. This book seems, like so many others, to just leave the reader hanging, with no clear answers. More than a decade of work in Christian retail has shown me that people are looking for answers. If clear answers cannot be found in the writings of well-known leaders, where will they turn? I believe this is an important part of the responsibility of pastors and teachers to be faithful to the Word of God. Without it, we are headed for trouble.

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### **Kate Davis says**

Rob's not a universalist.

But God is.

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### **Bill says**

I felt excited to read a book that is causing so much controversy in the Evangelical Christian world. It's nice to feel "current."

After watching Bell's trailer for the book and watching the Nooma video style of the presentation, I was looking forward to seeing how he would flesh out his ideas about heaven and hell in the book. It was disappointing to find out that the first chapter of the book was nearly word-for-word the trailer that I had watched on the internet. The entire book is written like an overlong Nooma video - short sentences that often end in question marks, pauses for thinking (space on the page), and a few comments that lead to near-conclusions and then just hang there in the empty space on the page. This works really well in a Nooma video. In a book, I was hoping for something more. The wide margins, extra space between the lines, and the occasional shift to free verse form make the book seem a lot thicker than it is. And I guess this is my chief criticisms: it's just too thin.

The idea of a loving God sending some/many of his creatures to eternal suffering is a major problem (sorry fellow evangelicals!), and thus it deserves a major examination. Instead, we have Rob Bell presenting only a glancing of an alternative scenario to the end of times, using specific parables and passages from the Bible. It makes me wonder if I have made the mistake of thinking that I am the target market of this book - it must be aimed at people who aren't ready to embrace the gospel of Christ because they can't reconcile this strange doctrine of judgment. I am coming to this book having embraced the gospel but knowing (and struggling through) the passages that have led to the conclusions of the general church, and I was hoping for an in-depth analysis of these passages. Instead, I felt like I was reading a book written by a nice guy who is hopeful that things will turn out better because of a different reading of a few passages, but he isn't quite ready to deal with the toughest parts of scripture.

There also seemed to be a need to stay current. In the midst of his musings on heaven and hell, Bell references his experience at Eminem's 2010 comeback concert in Detroit:

"...It was then that I noticed something fascinating.

Eminem was wearing a cross around his neck.

Now, we see crosses all the time,  
that's nothing new.

They're around somebody's neck,  
on a church building,  
on a sign at a sporting event.

It's an icon,  
a sign,  
a sculpture,  
it's on someone's arm as a tattoo -  
the cross is everywhere."

(Is Rob Bell is trying to present his musings as found poetry? Just because your prose may sound nice, I don't think it needs to be presented in verse form.) It's unclear to me why he needs to reference Eminem except to let me know that he can handle the modern rap concert experience. What is clear to me is that Eminem wearing a cross is NOT fascinating, since his next comments are that it is utterly predictable and ubiquitous. By the end of the short chapter (they're all short), Bell muses more about whether Eminem has found the truth and maybe that's why he wears a cross. It feels like a forced youth pastor move to me.

There are some strong parts of the book, particularly the second last chapter that examines the prodigal son story. Here, Bell is finally taking strong steps towards developing his theology, even challenging the prevailing atonement theory (Jesus rescues us from God). If only he wrote the rest of the book in this fashion!

Rob Bell certainly has the best of intentions in writing this book. It's been awkward watching him get kicked around during the Love Wins press tour. He keeps saying that he wants to begin the conversation. Hopefully, there will be others who will say more. There already has been some thought-provoking books on this subject. Brian McLaren does far more with this topic in "The Last Word and The Word After That," actually covering everything Rob Bell touches on. Clark Pinnock's (out of print) "A Wideness In God's Mercy" asks the same question and examines the scriptural passages very closely (and it ends humbly: "If I'm wrong about this, God has enough mercy to forgive me."). The best of the bunch would be N.T. Wright's "Surprised By Hope" - it's scholarly, readable, and expansive.

Oh, yeah - there's also a guy named C.S. Lewis who wrote an imaginative and thoughtful story called "The Great Divorce." Rob Bell mentions this and N.T. Wright's book in his recommended reading section. If "Love Wins" can lead all of its readers to these two books, then it is certainly not a waste of time - it's just a brief beginning to a rich conversation.

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**Randy Alcorn says**

It contains some good and accurate things here and there, but unfortunately its central message is in explicit contradiction to Scripture and historic Christianity.

Oddly, Bell insists that he's not a universalist, yet his book indicates that he believes exactly what universalism does—that every human being will ultimately be saved, and that none will experience Hell. To teach this and yet claim you're not a universalist (just because you disagree with some things that some universalists think) is like saying that though you cheer for the Red Sox you're not a Red Sox fan, or though you own a dog, you are not a dog-owner. I mean, come on, go ahead and qualify the brand of universalist you are, but don't deny you're a universalist when your core belief is the core belief of universalism. The very fact that Bell can make such a statement and get away with it is indicative of the sort of cloudy thinking that has taken hold.

I recommended before Kevin DeYoung's excellent detailed critique of Love Wins. I want to add my recommendation of Dan Franklin's new and outstanding 35-minute podcast concerning Love Wins. Dan is a clear-thinking, biblically-based pastor at my home church. (He is also a fine husband to my daughter Karina and a loving father to my grandsons Matt and Jack, but that's not why I'm recommending this audio commentary!) Dan does a weekly podcast called Groupthink Rescue, and Love Wins is his subject this week. He's also written a more detailed critique, but I found his podcast particularly clear, thoughtful and easy to listen to. If you're going to invest just a half hour on this issue, I can't think of a better way to do it. You can also listen to or download from iTunes, and subscribe to his podcast, which has other equally good episodes.

I posted earlier a link to the chapter on Hell from my book If God is Good. Someone who read Bell's book and then my chapter said to me that oddly, it appeared to them as if I had made an attempt at refuting every major point of Bell's book. Obviously that wasn't the case, since I wrote it two years before Bell's book came out. But when I read Love Wins, at times I saw why this reader thought that. I suppose Rob Bell has successfully set forth all the modern presumptions that people bring to this issue, and that keep them from trusting the biblical teaching about Hell that has been part of historic Christianity. In addressing those presumptions, without knowing it, I was anticipating Bell's book. This also shows that, as Bell admits, he's not saying much that's new. Unfortunately, he is reaching a huge audience, and his book sales have been further fueled by the controversy. But I would rather have more books sell and more people equipped to refute his teachings, then avoid the controversy—some things warrant controversy, and this is one of them, since the gospel itself is on the line—and not just before the watching world, but inside churches.

What most breaks my heart is that, when it comes down to it, Bell is actually saying "Jesus was wrong." Now, of course, he would never actually say that in those words. Nor does he consciously believe it. But because (as I show in both Heaven and If God is Good) Jesus is absolutely emphatic on the reality and nature and eternality of Hell, it is impossible to disbelieve in Hell, and to believe in universal salvation, and actually believe what Jesus said.

Why? Because Jesus referred to Hell as a real place and described it in graphic terms (see Matthew 10:28; 13:40–42; Mark 9:43–48). He spoke of a fire that burns but doesn't consume, an undying worm that eats away at the damned, and a lonely and foreboding darkness.

Christ says the unsaved "will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Jesus taught that an unbridgeable chasm separates the wicked in Hell from the righteous in Paradise. The wicked suffer terribly, remain conscious, retain their desires and memories, long for relief, cannot find comfort, cannot leave their torment, and have no hope (see Luke 16:19–31).

Our Savior could not have painted a bleaker picture of Hell.

C. S. Lewis said, “I have met no people who fully disbelieved in Hell and also had a living and life-giving belief in Heaven.”[1] The biblical teaching on both destinations stands or falls together. If the one is real, so is the other; if the one is a myth, so is the other. The best reason for believing in Hell is that Jesus said it exists.

Some will say, “Okay, maybe Hell exists, but no one will go there, or if they do it will only be temporary; surely Hell is not eternal.” But Jesus said, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). Here in the same sentence, Christ uses the word “eternal”(aionos) to describe the duration of both Heaven and Hell. Thus, according to our Lord, if some will consciously experience Heaven forever, then some must consciously experience Hell forever.

The best reason for believing Hell not only exists, but will be inhabited by people and is eternal, is that Jesus said so in the clearest possible language.

It isn’t just what Jesus said about Hell that matters. It’s the fact that it was He who said it.

“There seems to be a kind of conspiracy,” wrote Dorothy Sayers, “to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of Hell comes from. The doctrine of Hell is not ‘mediaeval priestcraft’ for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin.... We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.”[2]

Why do I believe in an eternal Hell? Because Jesus clearly and repeatedly affirmed its existence. As Sayers suggested, you cannot dismiss Hell without dismissing Jesus.

Atheist Bertrand Russell wrote, “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in Hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment.”[3]

Shall we believe Jesus or Bertrand Russell? For me, it is not a difficult choice.

C. S. Lewis said of Hell, “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”[4]

We cannot make Hell go away simply because the thought of it makes us uncomfortable. If I were as holy as God, if I knew a fraction of what He knows, I would realize Hell is just and right. We should weep over Hell, but not deny it.

Rob Bell is a pastor, and has a lot of influence on other pastors, and not only in emergent churches. And that is perhaps the greatest tragedy in this. Titus 1:9 says this of the church leader: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” It is every pastor’s job to correct doctrinal error, particularly in the central issues of the faith. When a pastor actually promotes doctrinal error, this is particularly serious. And it puts a heavy responsibility on other pastors, who understandably don’t want to appear to be critical, to correct and refute doctrinal heresy.

It grieves me how many people are reading Rob Bell’s book and books such as The Shack (where universalism is not explicit but clearly flirted with) and other writings contradicted by Scripture, whose pastors don’t consider it their job to enter into controversy. We have elevated tolerance over sound doctrine,

and appearing to be nice, over being truthful. As Jesus was, we should be full of grace and truth, not choose one over the other.

We dare not act as though love demands we be quiet about the truth. In fact, Scripture calls upon us to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). I would encourage all pastors to address this issue. Consider going to your pastor and asking him to preach about the biblical doctrine of Hell in light of all the fuzzy thinking on this issue that is out there, and has been galvanized through Bell's book. (Fifteen years apart, I spent hours in dialogue, citing passage after passage, to two different highly influential former pastors, each of whose books have sold millions of copies to evangelical Christians. Both of these men gradually became universalists, and they believe most of what Bell is now teaching; perhaps one of them influenced him, I don't know.)

It is not loving to be silent when people are told the lie that they need not turn to Christ in this lifetime to be saved from their sins. If people believe that there is no Hell, or that they cannot end up in Hell, or that Hell is not their default and fully deserved destination, then it virtually guarantees they will end up in the Hell that Rob Bell doesn't believe in.

In the final day no one will stand before me in judgment. No one will stand before Rob Bell in judgment. We will all stand before Jesus in judgment. And it is His view of Hell, not mine or Rob Bell's, that will be proven, forever, to be true.

If Rob Bell is right and there isn't an eternal Hell, or no one will end up there, then Jesus made a terrible mistake. And if we cannot trust Jesus in His teaching about Hell, why should we trust anything He said, including His offer of salvation?

We may pride ourselves in thinking we are too loving to believe in Hell. But in saying this, we blaspheme, for we claim to be more loving than Jesus—more loving than the One who with outrageous love took upon himself the full penalty for our sin.

Who are we to think we are better than Jesus?

Or that when it comes to Hell, or anything else, we know better than He does?

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

This is a pretty good book and it deals with a subject that needs to be looked at. I'm not going to try and go into the subject in depth here in the review as it will be to some controversial and I'm not going for that. If you wish to discuss it in comments I'll join in so long as we keep things civil.

And that says a bit about the book's subject. Christians should always be civil, but too often those of us who claim the name of Christ tend to act or react in the wrong way. Bell here attempts to take a look at the teaching that is so prevalent in some groups that says there is a small number of people God is saving but the vast majority of humanity is destined for an eternity of punishment. Even when I was part of a church that taught this I could never understand it when I looked at what the Bible teaches about God and his character. God is love, He is a loving God of mercy and grace. It just never made sense. I have over the last several years come to see/believe that this is a misunderstanding of scripture and not the plan of God, not the provision made by Jesus Christ when he died and rose for "all people".

This book attempts to look at this. I give it a 3 star rating because it tends to be somewhat convoluted and I think in his attempts to explain his understanding he tends to actually muddy the water a bit.

So, it's a pretty good book, maybe a good part of a study on this subject, but I don't think it will really clear things up much.

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### Allie says

FREAKIN' BEST EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN MATERIAL I HAVE EVER READ.

So I'd recently started John Shelby Spong's *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (will write about that one when I finish it!), but then...

B&N had this on display.

I sat in the store and read it all the way through.

OMG.

1) This is VERY BOLD for a megachurch pastor. Rob Bell is an open-minded contemporary voice, which mainstream Christianity in this country has needed for a long time. MAJOR KUDOS.

2) He is eloquent and writes in an easy-to-read format. Lots of line breaks, kind of poetic. Sometimes a lil lame/pastor-y, but I enjoyed the rhetoric. He even gets a lil mystical toward the end. NICELY DONE.

3) He seems well-versed in his church history, which is rare for evangelical Christians. Moreover, he credits all of those thinkers of the past with the ideas that he presents to us.

4) I'm rusty & n00b with teh Bible so I can't critique here. I liked Bell's readings. They're about story-telling and transcendence. They're very rooted in both Jewish and Christian traditions and conscious not only of humanity but also of the world & nature, with death & rebirth being the cycles of life and the universe. Hell, he suggests, is on earth, as is Heaven, and we have the mission not to convert people to our beliefs, but to make the world better. (Some topics he highlights are environmental protection and racism, which I thought was interesting.) Jesus is unconditional love, all-inclusive, so that even if we don't profess to be Christians, we can participate.

It's a compelling synthesis, a vision of Christianity that is generous and optimistic, true to the heart of the religion, and truly universal. Bell asks questions and doesn't tell us what is "right" to believe, but he invites us to consider and to imagine--imagine something bigger, something loving. I am extra delighted by this and by the huge audience that he is reaching.

As a non-Christian, I TOTALLY DIGGED IT. Soooo going to own it and lend it out to my friendz!!

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### Jasmine says

Okay so I guess this isn't the kind of book I'm expected to read. But hell who cares about expected.

I'm not the biggest fan of christianity in the world. I grew up congregational and was told at 14 that children were too stupid to have opinions about god. I was evangelical for a couple years (yeah whole way talking in tongues and all, anyone want to talk about group theory). Eventually, for complicated reasons I decided I didn't believe in god.

For years I've been part of a religion forum, it used to be on myspace but over the years various contingents of the group have migrated to various other places. I decided to read this book when one of those people told me Rob Bell was a heretic. And they're right he is. I mean he actually talks about context in the bible. And I don't mean the old testament, kill all the guys that just got circumcised context but did you know there was context to what jesus said? yeah no joke.

She told me that what he said wasn't true biblically, as someone who's read the bible, I'd say it is, he definitely admits to things christians don't usually admit like context. She said he cherry picks, and really that's just the pot calling the kettle black, if you don't cherry pick the bible makes no sense, but with that I think he is more broad and encompassing than a lot of people and even directly addresses stories that don't on surface agree with him and explains his reading of them.

And lets go pragmatism for a second. what's the outcome of all this? He says that christianity is about love and mercy not eternal damnation. and I'm sorry but anyone that thinks love is heretical, I'm not sure I want anything to do with their religion.

A really good point he makes: You can convert anytime you are alive, but the second you die you are condemned to hell forever. this tells us god is a merciful god till we die, then when we die no more second chances, this feels like 2 gods.

the main problem religionwise, most of what he says sounds like nonreligious reincarnation in buddhism, the hungry ghost metaphor. basically he almost makes god redundant. I'm cool with this cause living for the afterlife is unhealthy, but I get why it scares christians, if god isn't out to get them they get all uncomfortable in believing in him, which is of course a problem that bell seems to want to fix.

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## **Ben De Bono says**

At this point you've probably had more than your fill of opinions on Love Wins. But since I'm never one to shy away from controversy, I'll throw mine in there anyway.

Before I get to the actual content of the book, I want to first talk about it in terms of quality. Rob Bell is an incredible communicator. Hearing him speak, regardless of how you feel about the content, is pretty incredible. Because of that I was surprised by how much I couldn't stand his writing style. Seriously, almost every page of this book was like claws on the chalkboard. I found his writing to be choppy and lacking much of any flow.

Maybe that's because  
he insists on  
putting weird  
paragraph breaks

mid sentence.

It's extremely annoying. I haven't read anything else by him so I can't say if this is standard for him, but based on Love Wins I think Rob needs to stick to speaking. For as good as he is at that, his writing style is, in my opinion, badly in need of some work.

That said, I'm in the minority position on his writing style and the main point with the book isn't style but content. Let me start with the good stuff (and despite the fact that this will be a critical review there is a lot of good stuff).

First, his chapter on Heaven is phenomenal. He hits it spot on and is dead right about how our typical, evangelical view of Heaven does not line up with what the Bible actually has to say on the subject. N.T. Wright's influence is very visible in this chapter and that's a good thing. I think Wright is one of the best theologians out there today and I'm glad his teaching has a significant place in Rob Bell's work.

Second, I'd say the same thing, though slightly less enthusiastically, about the next chapter describing hell. We're not talking yet about what Bell has to say regarding whether or not hell is permanent. At this point he's just describing hell. Let me say here that if you've heard people accuse Bell of not believing in hell they're wrong. He clearly believes in a literal hell. You can't come away from this book thinking he believes anything else.

Third, I am grateful that he's raising these issues. I don't agree with his conclusions, but he's absolutely right that there are a lot of Christians asking these questions and we owe it to them to stop giving crappy, cheap, cop-out answers. That was a very good, and much needed, reminder to me as a pastor. I owe more to the people I'm ministering to than the cheap answers they've typically been given.

The good stuff I just described makes up a significant portion of the book. Before I launch into what's bad, let me say that my disagreement is primarily focused on two chapters out of eight. Chapter 4: Does God Get What He Wants and Chapter 6: There Are Rocks Everywhere. A couple of my criticisms carry over to the book as a whole, but for the most part the rest of the book is either good or I'm neutral on. So to be clear, roughly 75% of the book I'm ok with. I say that because it's not my intention to rip on Bell or tear him down as a horrible heretic. I'm good with 75% of what he says. The other 25% has some major issues.

To start with I want to describe the positions Bell is advocating. In chapter 4 he argues for the position that hell is not permanent. He puts forward the concept of postmortem evangelism. He argues that the idea that God would ever stop pursuing someone, even after death, is not compatible with the idea of a loving God. Since God desires all to be saved he will pursue us until that happens, while simultaneously giving us the freedom to continually reject him.

In chapter 6 he argues for a strong inclusivist position on the issue of salvation. He argues that it is not necessary to be a Christian in order to have Jesus save you. He applies this not only to cultures and people that have never heard the Gospel but to those that have as well. In other words, it's possible to be a Muslim, Hindu, whatever and still follow Jesus.

Bell recognizes some will disagree with him on these issues. His main concern is not so much to convince everyone to these positions but to argue that these positions are compatible with biblical orthodoxy. He states several times that orthodoxy is a wide stream and these positions fall within that stream. To me, that's the real issue at hand. Are these positions biblically orthodox? Whether I agree with them or not, do they fall within the stream of orthodoxy?

This link: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/t...> is to a great article that outlines a spectrum of positions on the issues salvation. It's a bit long so let me briefly summarize the nine positions it describes.

1. Church Exclusivism - you are only saved if you're a member of a church
2. Gospel Exclusivism - you can only be saved by hearing the Gospel
3. Special Revelation Exclusivism - you can only be saved through special revelation. In some cases this may come apart from the Gospel
4. Agnosticism - we don't know the answer to what happens to those who haven't heard but we trust God's goodness and generosity
5. General Revelation Inclusivism - It's possible to be saved through general revelation, God revealing himself through nature
6. World Religions Inclusivism - Jesus can save through out faiths and religions
7. Postmortem Evangelism - For those not saved during this life, the opportunity for salvation exists even in hell
8. Universalism - Jesus will save everyone regardless of their belief or faith
9. Pluralism - all paths to God are equally valid

A couple observations before I continue. Rob Bell has been accused of being a universalist. He isn't, at least not according to the criteria above. I say that because I think it's important to be accurate, fair and to correctly define the terms we use. I'm using the list above as my criteria and according to that Rob Bell is in no way a universalist.

Of course, that doesn't mean his views are without issue. Rob Bell is clearly advocating positions 6 and 7 on the above list. According to the author of the article those fall outside biblical orthodoxy. I agree. I believe the church has traditionally accepted positions 1-5. I personally believe position 1 to be unbiblical but I would say anywhere from 2-5 can be well defended biblically and historically. Personally I'm mostly in position 4 with a bit of leaning toward 5.

Rob Bell's defense of positions 6 and 7 is very problematic. First, he attempts to support the positions using Scripture. In doing so he pulls verses way, way out of context. Take for example Jesus' condemnation of Capernaum where he says that on the day of judgment it will be worse for them than for Sodom and Gomorrah. Bell interprets this to mean that there's still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah. That interpretation is absurd and it fails to take into account Jesus' use of hyperbole and metaphor.

Bell is happy to include genre in his hermeneutic when discussing things like the judgment described at the end of Revelation, but he ignores it when it's something that supports his case, such as verses in Psalms. It may be possible to defend Bell's position biblically but he has not done so. Instead he has practiced extremely poor hermeneutics and shown a complete disregard for context.

The same thing holds goes for his attempt to show that his views have been historically held by the church. He offers a few sources for evidence. He claims that Origen and Gregory of Nyssa held to the idea of postmortem evangelism. He claims that Augustine references several unnamed people who hold the view. Finally, he uses a quote by Martin Luther that seems to support the view.

In the case of Origen he's right. However, many people in the church have rejected Origen's teaching as a whole because of this. I don't think that's fair but when we're arguing for historic acceptance you can't ignore that. The evidence is sketchy about Gregory of Nyssa. I have no issue with Bell claiming him as a possible example but he acts as though it's definitive that he held this position. It isn't. Augustine's quote is far too vague to be considered as evidence one way or another.

But it's the Luther quote that really pushes me over the edge. First, the quote is from a private letter. Second, it's taken way out of context. Third, I'm confident Luther rolled over in his grave when Bell wrote this. Bell repeatedly attacks the position that only a few people make it into Heaven while the rest suffer for eternity but **THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT LUTHER BELIEVED!** Luther does not agree with Bell and, given Luther's infamous lack of tact, would probably have had some very pointed things to say about Bell.

It's here that Bell completely loses me. Misquoting Luther in this way shows that he has no regard for the actual evidence for and against his case. He's pulling stuff way out of context and hoping his audience doesn't look to closely. Quite frankly it's insulting and another example of really bad writing.

When it comes to his argument for world religions inclusivism, the same hermeneutical concerns apply. Rather than rehashing that, I want to focus on what Bell says regarding the exclusive and unique nature of Christianity. He makes the statement that Jesus is bigger than Christianity and does not belong exclusively to it. Now, if we're talking about Christianity in terms of an organized church I agree. Jesus is bigger than Catholicism/Protestantism. He's bigger than any denomination or local church body. For any of those groups to claim exclusive access to him is a major theological error.

However, if we define Christianity as the Universal Church then Rob Bell is 100% dead wrong. Jesus and the Church are inseparable. It is his body. To follow Jesus is to join the Universal Church and that is what Christianity, stripped of all of its organized and denominational elements, is.

When Rob Bell makes the argument that Jesus can save through Islam, Hinduism or any other faith he is denying the biblical nature of the Church. Let me be clear, Jesus can certainly save those who are Muslim, Hindus or anything else. However, by their salvation they are called out of their religion and into the Universal Church. There may, in some cases, be some cultural practices that stick around but the idea of a Hindu Christian or a Muslim Christian is not biblical. When Paul and the early Apostles preached the Gospel they called people out of pagan practices and to Christianity. He also called people out of Judaism and to Christianity. This is part of why Paul had so many issues with the Judaisers. The idea of someone continuing to sacrifice to pagan gods or keep the law to the same degree the Jews did was unthinkable to Paul and much of the early church. But when Rob Bell claims that it's possible to be a Muslim Christian that is exactly what he is suggesting as a possibility. It is not biblical. It is not historically orthodox. It should be soundly rejected.

So to wrap up, where does that leave Rob Bell? Some have dismissed him entirely (e.g. John Piper's now infamous tweet). Others disagree with my assessment and see no issue at all. But for those of us who see the problems, where does that leave us? I'm not going to proclaim Bell a heretic. I believe that his view on world religions inclusivism is heretical and represents a serious error, but I'm not going to say he should be wholly rejected as a teacher because of it. I'd rate his view on postmortem evangelism as heterodoxical. It's not as serious as outright heresy but it goes beyond biblical orthodoxy. It does not fit into the wide stream Bell is such a fan of referencing. If there is a case to be made for it, Bell has failed to effectively do so.

My star rating: 1 star for style/quality. 3 stars for content. That averages out to 2 stars

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### **Rhonda says**

I rarely give books one star.....

Rob Bell tries to give us a new (but old) perspective on heaven, hell and God's love. To be honest, I have never really been a Bell fan. His style of seeking truth, while earnest, seems awfully fallible. When the Bible and your own experience have almost equal weight, TRUTH can be very ambiguous.

Things I agree with:

- \* God is love and his love is huge for everyone.
- \* Jesus came to give us right relationship with God.
- \* Having a right relationship with God means bringing his peace and healing to our world here and now.

Things I am troubled by (that I think he implied or said):

- \* Hell is the yucky stuff here on earth.
- \* Hell is just heaven (except that you may not want to be there).
- \* God will give us an eternity to choose him (except that some **STILL** may not choose).
- \* Some, perhaps, maybe, might end up separated from God in the end. We don't know and we have to be OK with this "tension."

This message is really palatable. I can imagine why people want to believe this. But when I think back over all the scripture he uses, I am not convinced it says what he thinks it does. He throws out A LOT of scripture taking much of it out of context or using it in ways I am not sure fit. For example, he spends a lot of time talking about the feast from the parable Prodigal Son, drawing out what it tells us about heaven, when I think the point of the parable was the state of people's hearts before God and the people we might find in heaven that surprise us.

He spends another long section saying, "We define our God, then our God defines us." He also talks about this idea of God wooing us over an eternity as a "much better story." Huh? Since when do I get to tell God who he is and what story I think is best?

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