

The PenCC Local Church Online Resources

A Review of Rob Bell's Book *Love Wins*: Part One

By Michael Podhaczky

Scott McKnight claims that "I've never seen a response to a book, or a person, like the response to Rob Bell's book."¹ I have read Bell's controversial and provocative book a number of times and over the next three weeks will briefly review *Love Wins*. Bell is the founding pastor of Mars Hill church in Wheaton; Illinois, the creator of the DVD series the NOOMA Files and author of a number of books, including the book under review.² A storm was raging around the book, even before its launch in March of this year. In it Bell challenges some traditional theological ideas,

"There are a number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus' story has been hijacked by a number of other stories... I've written this book because the kind of faith Jesus invites us into doesn't skirt the big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgement and heaven and hell, but takes us deep into the heart of them."³

Response to his book has polarised developing into a fierce dog fight. For example, Kevin DeYoung in opposition to it has alleged that "The theology is heterodox (contrary to the orthodox position). The history is inaccurate. The impact on souls is devastating. And the use of Scripture is indefensible. Worst of all, *Love Wins* demeans the cross and misrepresents God's character."⁴ Bill O'Reilly of FoxNews.com asked Franklin Graham's (one Billy Graham's sons) opinion of Rob Bell, "he wasted no time saying 'First of all I believe the man (Rob Bell) is a false teacher and a heretic.'"⁵

Whereas, Brian D. McLaren in support of the book states that "In *Love Wins*, Rob Bell tackles the old heaven-and-hell question and offers a courageous alternative answer."⁶ The publisher's copy in advertising the book maintains that,

"Now, in *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Bell addresses one of the most controversial issues of faith—the afterlife—arguing, 'would a loving God send people to eternal torment forever?' With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial, and his message is decidedly hopeful—eternal life doesn't start when we die; it starts right now. And ultimately, *Love Wins*."⁷

¹ McKnight, Scott. "Exploring Love Wins." <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2011/04/11/exploring-love-wins-5/> (4th July 2011).

² Mars Hill. "Rob Bell – Bio." <http://marshill.org/rob-bell/> (4th July 2011). Meacham, Jon. "Pastor Rob Bell: What if Hell Doesn't Exist." Time Magazine (Thursday April 14th 2011).

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2065080,00.html> (4th July 2011). Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. (London, UK: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2011), Inside of the back of the dust jacket.

³ Bell, *Love Wins*, vii, ix.

⁴ God is Still Holy and What you Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of "Love Wins."

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (4th July 2011).

⁵ "Franklin Graham Calls Rob Bell a False Teacher." <http://techlinkonline.net/2011/05/franklin-graham-calls-rob-bell-a-false-teacher/> (4th July 2011).

⁶ Amazon.com. *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

"Editorial Reviews: <http://www.amazon.com/Love-Wins-About-Heaven-Person/dp/006204964X> (4th July 2011).

⁷ HarperCollins Publishers. *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. <http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Love-Wins-Rob-Bell/?isbn=9780062049636> (4th July 2011).

As a result of this stand-up fight over the book, Bell has been accused of things ranging from being a Universalist, pantheist, too promoting an unbalanced analysis of the attributes of God focusing exclusively on His love. Some have even gone in so far as, calling him a heretic, or false teacher promoting another gospel. Consequently, what does all of this suggest? Are the accusations true, or is it all merely a kneejerk reaction to something that is controversial and provocative? Is he merely interpreting the idea of heaven and hell from an alternative perspective? For all of the controversy swirling around the book, it has encouraged the Church to revisit the matter of heaven and hell. Over the following two Sunday's, I will review some of the central ideas from Bell's *Love Wins*.