

The PenCC Local Church Online Resources

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

By Michael Podhaczky

Last week I began a short review of Rob Bell's controversial and provocative book *Love Wins*, originally called *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. As I prayerfully and sincerely go on with the review over the next two weeks, can I please ask you to capture the spirit in which it has been written? It has not been written to provide ammunition to damage anyone who may not have the same opinion, which you may hold. Essentially this is a concise review of *Love Wins*, and not an opportunity to bash Rob Bell or anyone else for that matter. As mature Christians, we should be able to truthfully and as accurately as possible critique a person's work without becoming bitter, quarrelsome, or speaking maliciously of them whether we agree with them or not. Rather, this should be an opportunity for prayerful tenderhearted learning and reasoning. I know that some will ignore what I have said in this paragraph, choosing rather to demean or attack those who do not agree with them on their stance and I cannot do anything about that.

It has been observed that "The book contains volleys of rapid-fire questions but isn't so good at giving answers, at least not clear ones."¹ Nonetheless, Bell points out that "There is no question, that Jesus cannot handle, no discussion to volatile, no issue to dangerous'...this isn't a just a book of questions. It is a book of responses to these questions."² This is not a new style used by Bell here in *Love Wins*; he has used it in his NOOMA series and books like *Velvet Elvis*.³ He questions some potential points of possible departure from the orthodox position, which are been held by many within the church.

There is nothing wrong asking questions' regarding any important theological matter, providing these questions are not intentionally for making theological suggestions as leading questions, or even rhetorical questions to try to influence others to your own theological opinion. The danger of these kinds of questions if not managed correctly within this context is that they may lead to the heterodox (opposite to the orthodox or accepted position) conclusion as to the character of God. It would be irresponsible for questions like these to be left unanswered, hanging, or give answers that are either speculation (guesswork) or heterodox, which would appear to be the case with *Love Wins*.⁴ A case at hand, is that it would seem that Bell has assumed the task of speaking on behalf of millions of Christians when he asks,

"Millions of Christians secretly struggle how to reconcile God's love and God's judgement: Has God created billions of people over thousands of years only to select

¹ Tidball, Derek (30th March 2011) "Rob Bell's *Love Wins* only presents 'half the truth' – theologian." Christianity Today, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/rob.bells.love.wins.only.presents.half.the.truth.theologian/27751-2.htm> (11th July 2011).

² Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. (London, UK: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2011), x, 19.

³ Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). For a list of the Rob Bell works see the Zondervan website at "Rob Bell." <http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Authors/Author.htm?ContributorID=BellR&QueryStringSite=Zondervan> (13th July 2011).

⁴ "A Panel Discussion of Rob Bell's *Love Wins*." (17th March 2011). <http://www.fightingforthefaith.com/2011/03/panel-discussion-of-rob-bells-love-wins.html> (13th July 2011). See also *Love Wins* promo by Rob Bell. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODUvw2McL8g> (13th July 2011).

a few to go to heaven and everyone else to suffer forever in hell? Is this acceptable to God?”⁵

Bell's questions here flow from his basic premise found within *Love Wins*, namely, from the beginning to the end, that 'God is love.'

“I believe that Jesus' story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful expansive love, and it is for everyone, everywhere... Love demands freedom. It always has, and it always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God's ways for us. We can have all the hell we want... Love is why I've written this book, and love is what I want to leave you with... And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins...”⁶

Bell stated in an interview with Lisa Miller from Newsweek regarding his book, that “I believe God is love.”⁷ I agree with Bell on this point, as it is theologically true that God is love (see 1 John 4:7, 16.) However, this is not merely a feeling of sentimental love, rather this love is one of God's great moral attributes (a quality of God character, it is who He is);⁸ it is also the first of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22. Scott McKnight has proposed “Hell is the hardest edge of God's love. You can rant and rave about hell all you want. And I'm totally open to exploring all current ideas about judgment, hell, Gehenna, hades, lake of fire and separation from God forever. What we can't do is turn God's love into grandma's lap.”⁹

Understanding 'God is love' cannot be held in isolation, particularly within the context of His character and His love as demonstrated through His actions throughout the Bible and especially through the death of Jesus Christ. To be precise, God poured out His righteous wrath (this is not some premeditated uncontrollable rage without intension or cause) on Jesus Christ on the cross, who became a curse for us redeeming us to Himself cf. Romans 3:21-25,26; 5:8-10; Galatians 3:13. It would seem that Bell struggles with theological ideas of God's wrath and justice in *Love Wins*. Therefore, states that

“You never knew if you'd fully pleased the gods and paid the debt properly...no more wondering if the gods were pleased with you or ready to strike you down. There was no more need of that sacrifice, because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice that thoroughly pleased the only God who ever mattered.”¹⁰

“Notice, Bell does not say that Jesus' death appeased the anger of God/gods, only that his sacrifice shows us we don't have to wonder any more if the gods are angry.”¹¹ Even though God's righteous wrath and justice can be hard for us as to grasp at times, our lack of

⁵ Bell, *Love Wins*, Inside the front dustcover.

⁶ Bell, *Love Wins*, vii, 113, 198.

⁷ Bell, Rob. (March 14th 2011). “Rob Bell on Universalism and orthodoxy.” http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2011/03/rob_bell_on_uni.html (11th July 2011).

⁸ Pink, A.W. “The Attributes of God: 15. The Love of God.” http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/Attributes/attrib_15.htm (11th July 2011). Deffinbaugh, Bob. (2011) “Let Me See Thy Glory - A Study of the Attributes of God.” <http://bible.org/series/let-me-see-thy-glory-study-attributes-god> (11th July 2011).

⁹ McKnight, Scott. “Love means never saying...” (6th July 2011). <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreeed/2011/07/06/love-means-never-saying/#more-17962> (13th July 2011).

¹⁰ Bell, *Love Wins*, 125.

¹¹ DeYoung, “God is Still Holy and what you Learned in Sunday School is Still True,” Page 16. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (11th July 2011).

comprehension does not cancel them out. In the same way, our lack of understanding concerning the appeasement of the wrath of God provided through Jesus' death, as our propitiation does not cancel this out either.

Bell rightly asserts that "God is love" but what about His other moral attributes such as Goodness, Mercy, Justice, Wrath, Holiness, Righteousness, Grace, Truth?¹² What about the intertwined Biblical truths of the attribute of Holiness of God, which was violated by the sinfulness of fallen humanity, the righteous wrath of God being appeased in the work Jesus Christ whom He gave (John 3:16) as our propitiation in redemption as required by His attributes of Justice and Righteousness? "It seems that he (Bell) is defining God by love, rather than defining love by God cf. 1 John 4:10...God's love is always set against the backdrop of God's righteousness, wrath, holiness...grace and undeserved mercy..."¹³

A final point of interest, is that *Love Wins* is published by HarperCollins Publishers and not Zondervan (which when it closes its Michigan storehouse will become a division of I HarperCollins),¹⁴ like Bell's other books. Why this split between Bell and Zondervan in this case?

"Bell's split from Zondervan came in part over this new book. 'The break with Zondervan was amicable,' Tauber said. 'In the end the president of Zondervan made the decision. The proposal came in and they said, "This proposal doesn't fit in with our mission.'" ¹⁵

Zondervan's mission as stated on their website is that they aspire "To be the leader in Christian communications meeting the needs of people with resources that glorify Jesus Christ and promote biblical principles."¹⁶ This is quite Christ centred and honouring mission statement. *Love Wins* was first published by HarperOne in the USA and then by HarperCollins in the UK (which is the same company just different branches). While HarperOne holds a more general religious mission statement in line with spirituality,

"HarperOne, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, strives to be the preeminent publisher of the most important books and authors across the full spectrum of religion, spirituality, and personal growth literature, adding to the wealth of the

¹² Duffield, G.P. & Van Cleave, N.M. *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. (Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1987), 68-79. Hanko, R. *Doctrines according to Godliness: A Primer of Reformed Doctrine*. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2044), 38-57. Erickson, M.J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 263-319. Pink, A.W. "The Attributes of God: 15. The Love of God."

http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/Attributes/attrib_15.htm (11th July 2011). Deffinbaugh, Bob. (2011) "Let Me See Thy Glory - A Study of the Attributes of God."

<http://bible.org/series/let-me-see-thy-glory-study-attributes-god> (11th July 2011).

¹³ "A Panel Discussion of Rob Bell's *Love Wins*." (17th March 2011). <http://www.fightingforthefaith.com/2011/03/panel-discussion-of-rob-bells-love-wins.html> (13th July 2011).

¹⁴ Martinez, S. "Zondervan will close West Michigan warehouse, eliminate 75 jobs in 2012." (12th May 2011). http://www.mlive.com/business/west-michigan/index.ssf/2011/05/zondervan_will_close_warehouse.html (13th July 2011).

¹⁵ Marrapodi, Eric. (CNN Belief Blog Co-Editor). "Firestorm Grows over 'Christian Heresy Book.'" <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/08/firestorm-over-bell-book-continues/> (11th July 2011). "Zondervan would not discuss its relationship with Bell but released a statement: 'Zondervan has published four books by Rob Bell, as well as numerous Nooma videos in which Rob was featured. We published these titles because we believed they were consistent with Zondervan's mission statement and publishing philosophy. We still believe these titles are impactful with their message and positive contribution and intend to continue to publish them.'"

¹⁶ "Our Mission and Values: The reason where here." <http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Company/Facts/Our+Mission.htm?QueryString=Zondervan> (13th July 2011).

world's wisdom by stirring the waters of reflection on the primary questions of life, while respecting all traditions."¹⁷

In Conclusion, in writing "as a pastor who wants to care for people struggling with the doctrine of hell,"¹⁸ Bell tries to provide answers to those 'Millions of Christians (that he assumes to speak on behalf of) who secretly struggle with how to reconcile God's love and God's judgement (or justice).' "In Bell's theology, God is love, a love that never burns hot with anger and a love that cannot distinguish or discriminate."¹⁹ Yet, this reconciliation between His love and justice has taken place in Jesus Christ. That is, God's character of love is seen demonstrated through His actions in the death of Jesus Christ when God poured out His righteous wrath on Him, thereby redeeming and reconciling us to Himself in Jesus Christ. John, in his writing in the 1 John, does not distinguish between a God who is love and a God who is just. Rather, this is one and the same God. It is through the cross of Jesus Christ that we see God's love and justice intertwined as an expression of the unified character of God.²⁰ In this light, it is more right to say that in the end "both love and justice win."²¹

¹⁷ Boutote, Claudia Riemer. "Corporate Press Release: HarperOne Mission Statement" (16/4/2007)

<http://www.harpercollins.com/footer/release.aspx?id=569&b=&year=2007> (11th July 2011).

¹⁸ DeYoung, "God is Still Holy and what you Learned in Sunday School is Still True," Page 20.

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (11th July 2011).

¹⁹ DeYoung, "God is Still Holy and what you Learned in Sunday School is Still True," Page 16.

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (11th July 2011).

²⁰ A Panel Discussion of Rob Bell's Love Wins." (17th March 2011). <http://www.fightingforthefaith.com/2011/03/panel-discussion-of-rob-bells-love-wins.html> (13th July 2011).

²¹ Tidball, "Rob Bell's Love Wins only presents 'half the truth' – theologian." (30th March 2011)

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/rob.bells.love.wins.only.presents.half.the.truth.theologian/27751-2.htm> (11th July 2011).