

The PenCC Local Church Online Resources

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

By Michael Podhaczky

This is the last of the three-part review of Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*. Last week I asked you to capture the spirit in which this review is written. I briefly dealt with Bell's basic premise for his book, which is, God is love. In this part, I will be dealing with Bell's proposal of 'Hell' and 'how God can tolerate it,' in light of what the Bible has to say on the matter. Hell can be an unnerving topic to discuss. Even the word 'hell' "has a terrifying sound and makes us shudder. It is no wonder that many today do not want to speak of it."¹ Nonetheless, it is a Biblical doctrine, which cannot be ignored.²

Bell's View of Hell

Last week I highlighted Scott McKnight's assessment that "Hell is the hardest edge of God's love."³ Rob Bell's opinion of Hell is "Do I believe in a literal hell? Of course...God gives us what we want, and if that's hell, we can have it."⁴ For Bell, "there is hell now..."⁵ that a person can find themselves in hell here on earth (for example, 'my life is hell on earth'), which that person/s have created for themselves or find themselves in this life "...and there is a hell later."⁶ "I see this every day, and so do you. People chose to live in their own hells all the time."⁷ So, to sum up the the idea of hell "We need a word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep without our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way. And for that, the word 'hell' works quite well. Let's keep it."⁸ He went on to say that

"What we see in Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus is an affirmation that there are different kinds of hells, because there are different ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next... We do ourselves great harm when we confuse the very essence of God, which is love, with the real consequences of rejecting and resisting that love, which creates what can be called hell."⁹

¹ Hanks, Ronald. *Doctrine according to Godliness*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing association, 2004.³²⁵

² DeYoung, Kevin. "To Hell with Hell." <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindyoung/2011/02/26/to-hell-with-hell/> (20th July 2011).

³ McKnight, Scott. "Love means never saying..." (6th July 2011). <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2011/07/06/love-means-never-saying/#more-17962> (13th July 2011).

⁴ Bell, *Love Wins*, 71, 72.

⁵ Bell, *Love Wins*, 79.

⁶ Bell, *Love Wins*, 71-72,79.

⁷ Bell, *Love Wins*, 114.

⁸ Bell, *Love Wins*, 93.

⁹ Bell, *Love Wins*, 179, 177.

As far as Rob Bell is concerned hell either now or later is only a temporary place. According to Bell, "...hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God...'forever' is not really a category the Biblical writers used."¹⁰ It is only a "'period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming' or 'an intense experience of correction.'"¹¹ Therefore, it would seem that it is more akin to a place of purgatory, which is only temporary. He uses the end of the book of Revelation to support his thesis when he says that "...we read in these last chapters of Revelation that the gates of that city in the new world will 'never shut.'"¹² Finally, Bell states,

"Can God bring proper, lasting justice, banishing certain actions-and people who do them-from the new creation while at the same time allowing and waiting and hoping for the possibility of the reconciliation of those very same people... Will everyone be saved, or will some perish apart from God because of their choices?"¹³

To these questions he answers that

"Those questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires."¹⁴

Therefore, by Bell's assessment, all will have access to the open gates of the New Jerusalem where no one will be shut out permanently. Although some (everyone) may (will) taste the justice of God through a "period of pruning," there is the strong possibility of all being saved.

But does this make him a Universalist, misguided or simply misunderstood?

An Evaluation of Bell's Hell

So, what can be said regarding Rob Bell's conclusions about hell in *Love Wins*? Well, Jon Meacham in the April 2011 edition of Time magazine suggests that "The traditionalist reaction is understandable, for Bell's arguments about heaven and hell raises doubts about the core of the Evangelical worldview, changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation."¹⁵ Hart says that "Jesus was the most caring and compassionate person who has ever lived, yet he refused to be silent about heaven and hell."¹⁶ Therefore, it has been said that "...if you take Jesus seriously, you are going to have to take hell seriously."¹⁷

¹⁰ Bell, *Love Wins*, 109, 92.

¹¹ Bell, *Love Wins*, 91.

¹² Bell, *Love Wins*, 114.

¹³ Bell, *Love Wins*, 115.

¹⁴ Bell, *Love Wins*, 115.

¹⁵ Meacham, Jon. (14th April 2011) "Pastor Rob Bell: What if Hell Doesn't Exist?"

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2065289,00.html> (20th July 2011).

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2065289,00.html>

¹⁶ Hart, Larry D. *Truth Aflame: Theology for the Church in Renewal*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 486.

¹⁷ Galli, Mark. (February 2011) "Heaven, Hell, and Rob Bell: Putting the Pastor in Context."

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/marchweb-only/rob-bell-universalism.html> (20th July 2011).

Bell's so called 'literal hell,' which he defines as being of a temporary earthly nature, which is for now, rather than of an eternal nature. This appears to be a deconstruction of what the Bible teaches about hell, in light of sin, forgiveness, redemption, God's never-ending justice and punishment. In response, DeYoung states quite strongly that "Hell is not what we make ourselves or gladly choose. It's what a holy God justly gives those who exchange the truth of God for a lie."¹⁸ Is Bell's redefinition of hell from being a future place of punishment, to being an experience here on earth in the present and adequate and Biblical conclusion? If hell is simply a 'period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming' or 'an intense experience of correction,' for everyone (for believer and non-believer) in preparation for the future life isn't this more in line with the idea of purgatory in its outworking than the Biblical idea of hell?¹⁹ Albert Mohler "...described the book as a 'velvet hell,' where Bell 'cushioned' the whole idea of eternal damnation."²⁰

Bell suggest that hell is not for eternity, since, in the book of Revelation indicates that Hell will actually be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:14), along with the beast, false prophet, devil, death, those not found in the Lambs book of Life and a list of the ungodly (Rev 19:20; 20:10,14,15; 21:8). Now the fire will last for eternity as it was "...prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41; cf. Matt 13:40-42). The Revelation which Bell perceives is in conflict with the Revelation that portrays that some will *not* be able to come in through the gates of the new heavenly city (Rev 21:8,27; 22:3,14-15,18-19; also see Is 66:22-24).

Bell has stated that "...hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God..."²¹ However, the context of this punishment, is that it does go on forever for people not found in the Lambs book of Life or the ungodly (Matt 25:46; Jn 3:16; Rev 14:10,11; 20: 15; 21:8). Any denial of an eternal punishment belittles sin...and calls into question the justice of God...also destroys the urgency of the gospel demand for repentance and faith."²²

"Even if you go to hell you can choose to come out of it,' explained Denny Burk, Dean of Boyce College, about the author's concept of hell. 'There is no final punitive retributive justice from God. [Bell] even says that... hell is a place of remediation, almost like a purgatory. He even says at one point that hell is not the wrath of God but it's the correction of a loving father.' 'I think [Bell] believes he's making Christianity safe for people to accept,' further expounded Moore. 'He's saying there's a problem [that] people can't receive the God that we talk about. [So] let's remove what is offensive and scandalous so we can reach people [and] they can become Christians.' By eliminating offensive and supposedly outdated doctrines, like the subject of

¹⁸ DeYoung, Kevin. (2011) "God is Still Holy and what you Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell." Page 19. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (15th July 2011).

¹⁹ DeYoung, Kevin. (2011) "God is Still Holy and what you Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell." Page 13. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/> (19th July 2011).

²⁰ Sun. Eryn. (March 2011) "Rob Bell's Velvet Hell? Albert Mohler, Others Speak on How Love Can Truly Win." <http://www.christianpost.com/news/rob-bells-velvet-hell-albert-mohler-others-speak-on-how-love-can-truly-win-49472/> (20th July 2011).

²¹ Bell, *Love Wins*, 109.

²² Hanks, *Doctrine according to Godliness*: 326, 327.

hell and God's wrath, Bell and many theological liberals believe that Christianity can be in a sense, saved."²³

So, finally, does Rob Bell hold to the idea of Universalism? "*Universalism* is the general belief that all will be saved, regardless of religious beliefs. The Muslim and the Christian are on the same basic path—and for Universalists all will be saved."²⁴ On Rob Bell's official website it states,

"Does *Love Wins* promote universalism?"

No. Rob isn't suggesting Universalism [all will be saved, regardless of their faith]. He is proposing that God's love is so big that the invitation to God's grace may extend into the next life so that all could be saved. *Love Wins* clearly points to the centrality of Jesus and the work of his life, death, and resurrection and the hope that Christ's work will bring restoration to all. Jesus is the only way to God. God's love does not force anyone and there may be those who continue to reject the invitation extended to them. *Love Wins* speaks often of human freedom [72-73, 103-104, 113, 115, 117]. Rob shares, "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 [113]."²⁵

Lisa Miller of *Newsweek* asked Bell point blank "Are you a Universalist?"²⁶ Bell answered by saying, "No! If by Universalism, you mean a giant cosmic arm that swoops everybody in at some point, whether you want to be there or not. If we mean by this, that God doesn't win and He co-ops every heart single handily casting a dark cloud on the occasion"²⁷ This has been called "Bell's philosophical construct (theory), in which he does not use the Bible."²⁸ Justin Taylor thinks that he does hold to the idea of Universalism when he states that

"...I'm glad that Rob Bell has the integrity to lay his cards on the table about universalism. It seems that this is not just optimism about the fate of those who haven't heard the Good News, but...full-blown hell-is-empty-everyone-gets-saved universalism."²⁹

²³ Sun, Eryn. (March 2011) "Rob Bell's Velvet Hell? Albert Mohler, Others Speak on How Love Can Truly Win." <http://www.christianpost.com/news/rob-bells-velvet-hell-albert-mohler-others-speak-on-how-love-can-truly-win-49472/> (20th July 2011).

²⁴ McKnight, Scott. "Universalism and the Doctrine of Rob Bell." <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/24878-universalism-and-the-doctrine-of-rob-bell> (20th July 2011). See also Milne, Bruce. *Know the Truth: A handbook of Christian belief*. (Leicester, UK: Inter-Vasity Press, 1996), 274.

²⁵ Dalrymple, Timothy. (March 2011) "A Defence of 'Love Wins' From Rob Bell's Mars Hill Church." <http://www.patheos.com/community/loveandjudgment/2011/03/17/a-defense-of-love-wins-from-rob-bells-mars-hill-church/> (20th July 2011).

²⁶ Bell, Rob. (March 14th 2011). "Rob Bell on Universalism and orthodoxy." http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2011/03/rob_bell_on_uni.html (20th July 2011).

²⁷ Bell, Rob. (March 14th 2011). "Rob Bell on Universalism and orthodoxy." http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2011/03/rob_bell_on_uni.html (20th July 2011).

²⁸ "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> (20th July 2011).

²⁹ Taylor, Justin. (2011) "Rob Bell: Universalist?" <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist/> (20th July 2011). See also Marrapodi, Eric. (CNN Belief Blog Co-Editor). "Christian Author's Book Sparks Charge of Heresy." <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/01/what-is-a-heretic-exactly-in-the-evangelical-church/?iref=allsearch> (20th July 2011).

Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* has pointed out that “He (Bell) makes the Universalist case most fully in one chapter, while avoiding the word Universalist.”³⁰ Scot McKnight points out that “I know of no other church connected to American evangelicalism that seems to be endorsing a second chance after a kind of purgatorial view of hell, but this purgatorial view of hell is for all humans.”³¹ I found what Michael Wittmer had to say quite revealing in the section entitled “Why Bell isn’t a universalist?” He sees Bell as a ‘soft Universalist’ when he writes:

“Bell’s emphasis on God’s loving freedom follows Barth’s example and pushes hard in the direction of universalism. And like Barth, Bell also stops just short of committing to full-blown universalism. But the reason Bell gives for stopping on the brink doesn’t come from Barth, but from Origen. Barth wouldn’t promise universal salvation because he thought it compromised God’s freedom; Bell won’t promise universal salvation because he believes it compromises our freedom.”³²

In conclusion, whether you agree with Bell or not, if *Love Win’s* has done anything it has fired an opportunity for much prayerful, tender-hearted discussion, learning, reasoning and debate on the love of God, heaven and hell. What do you believe on these topics and how does it stack up against the Biblical record? I would encourage you to revisit the topics and study them, really study them. “...Scot McKnight, a professor of theology at North Park University in Chicago, said they welcomed the renewed discussion of one of the hardest issues in Christianity — can a loving God really be so wrathful toward people who faltered, or never were exposed to Jesus?”³³ “As disagreeable as it is, the word hell may not be banished from our Bibles, our doctrine, or our thinking. It is critical to the preaching of the gospel. Without the doctrine of hell, the command of the gospel to repent or perish loses all its urgency.”³⁴ So, in light of humanities sinfulness, hell and eternal punishment, the love of God as shown through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is all the more magnificent in its grace. Larry Hart leaves us with the challenge that “If we really believed in hell, we would be moved to avert as many as we could from its horrors.”³⁵

³⁰ Galli, Mark. (July 2011) “Rob Bell’s Bridge to Far.”
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/april/lovewins.html> (20th July 2011).

³¹ McKnight, Scot (2011) “Rob Bell’s Reviews.”
<http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2011/03/19/rob-bell-reviews/> (20th July 2011).

³² Wittmer, Michael E. *Christ Alone*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Edenridge Press, eBook, 2011), 1129.

³³ Eckholm, Erik. (March 2011) “Pastor Stirs Wrath With His Views on Old Questions.”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/05/us/05bell.html> (20th July 2011).

³⁴ Hanko, *Doctrine according to Godliness*.³²⁵

³⁵ Hart, *Truth Aflame*, 528.