

A Review of Rob Bell's "Love Wins", by Hansen Wendlandt

The Question

Because of the hype surrounding his new book, "Love Wins", Rob Bell was, for a short while, a top-ten trend on Twitter. Inconceivable—a pastor was more popular, even for a short while, than Charlie Sheen! What's more, Bell didn't make any blindingly offensive comments against women, Muslims or gays, has no prediction of the world's coming end, and isn't even accused of an affair or funny money business. He just wrote a book about God. And think about how many people do that without a hint of recognition.

Even for a book about God, "Love Wins" has a lot of Bible verses, which is good for people who like that sort of thing. Despite that, Family Christian Bookstores refused to carry it—a "corporate decision" is their corporate line. So all those tweeters had to go to Cokesbury or Barnes and Noble to see what the fuss was about. Except, before the book was on anyone's shelves, millions of people who ten days previously had never used the word 'universalist' in a sentence, were alarmed that Rob Bell might be one. 'Universalism' is a big word for the belief that God sends everyone to heaven, which is apparently a really scandalous idea.

Some Christian leaders, whose own books have never sold as well as Bell's, but who talk a lot louder, were quick to protest his heresy. They are quite certain that God does NOT love the whole world, and that Jesus, though quite a nice guy, quite certainly condemns some people to hell. They are quite certain that he spent three whole years talking politely, frequently and specifically about hell, to people who understood everything he said and wrote down his words right away; and the Church has a 2000 year record of clarifying without dissent exactly what he told us to do and believe, in order to get into heaven... If some people don't get it, to hell with them. Literally.

And thus the fuss. Does God eternally and unconditionally love every person who ever lived, or do some of us end up suffering forever in hell?

To be fair, just about everyone who believes in the Christian God believes that God 'wants' to save everyone. Even those loud fundamentalists demonizing Bell believe that, I'll bet. The question at hand, however, is deeper. 'Does' God love everyone enough to leave hell empty, or is there no hope for certain people who act in unsavory ways, or believe rotten things, or fail to perform some ritual, or whatever other formula Christians find in the Bible? An even deeper issue behind that question—the issue at the heart of "Love Wins" and at the core of how anyone reads the Bible—is whether God is awesome or sucks. Either God is great, all the time, or the he isn't worth the golden calf he's made of. Should we live abundantly in joyful response to God's salvation, or should we fearfully/arrogantly mortgage our lives to God, Inc.?

The Answer

Thank goodness no one ever sympathizes with the guy whose bullhorn and colorful signs greet you at concert arenas and sporting events. Unfortunately, most Christians

believe things about God's salvation eerily closer to the bullhorn message than they care to acknowledge. Most Christians, quite reasonably, think bullhorn guy sets the bar for salvation far too high. However, without intending to set up their own boundaries to or requirements for God's amazing grace, many Christians, even pretty liberal ones, swear up and down that salvation is there for everyone... as long as you accept it, or if you don't accept it, as long as you live a really good life, like Gandhi. Gandhi's son? Maybe. Some random Hindi woman, who was mean to Pakistanis? Well, if she gets in, anyone gets in! And there's that universalism thing we can't have!

God's all about love, sure. But so many Christians get stuck with what God might do with, say, Hitler or their atheist uncle or the thousands of newborns who die every day around the world while we spend more time dealing with these sorts of questions than actually helping people. They may be mission-minded, kind to their neighbors, and faithful about tithing, mainstream Christianity is stunningly naïve about how exclusive its concept of heaven is, and how out-of-sight-out-of-mind is its concept of hell.

Just to cover the whole convoluted spectrum of opinions on salvation, there are also Christians who don't buy into hell at all, because they think the afterlife is a silly antiquated idea. That's their prerogative, to be sure. And they might fight for social justice, inspire peace, and care wonderfully for God's creation, but if you don't open the Bible at all, you don't get a voice in this debate. On the other end, we can't forget the cadre of fundamentalists, who raise their hands to the newest Christian music, try really hard to abstain from sex, and whose hypocrisy has set the cultural standard for American Christianity for more than a generation. No question of universalism here! Their pastors blather on very clearly about why God sends lots of people to hell. They just say that in an arena with a cool PowerPoint, rather than outside with cheesy handmade signs.

So, those are the many-colored feathers that Bell is ruffling. His "book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived" confronts the right, confuses the middle, and challenges the left to stop being theological couch potatoes. Right at the outset we are given a long list of Bible passages that seem to describe salvation like a game with rules about who wins and who loses (pages 12-18). But according to Bell, the central message of the gospel, from the Hebrew prophets through Jesus and Paul, is that God's love wins. Like JRR Tolkien's "hound of heaven", God relentlessly pursues us, pulling us toward heaven, all of us. Salvation is not a game we play. It is a gift God gives.

Is that heretical? Well, "Love Wins" is distinctly not a theological book, so it is interesting that the only time Bell leaves poetic sermonizing to engage in semantic hair-splitting is to distance himself from universalism—this, in his subsequent defense of the book, not within it. He does NOT advocate the idea that God opens the pearly gates and shoves us all in together, cheap and free grace to all, with no concern for our freedom in the matter. Instead, his position is actually more radical than that (!), in both senses of 'farther out there' and 'back to the roots of the faith'.

The Real Answer

How many of those tweeters do you think bothered to skim the Gospels before their thumbs typed #RobBell? When Christians read the Bible, we tend to project our own ideas about heaven and hell onto its words. We can't help it. Everything we read or watch or hear gets stuck into categories we already know. Call it a problem of personal perspective. Bell encourages us, instead, to pay attention to what Jesus said, rather than what we already think we know.

It's funny how controversial that idea is to mainstream Christianity. 'Pay attention to what the Bible actually says', is perhaps the foremost message of Bell, Brian McLaren, and the like, but the people who most froth about the Bible are the first to call these folks heretical. (Just a tangent, but would the New Atheists be kinder to these New Heretics?) Of course, the audience for Jesus' first sermon did quite the same thing, even threatening to throw Jesus off a cliff for getting back to the actual words of Isaiah (Luke 4). So, it probably can't hurt to see what Bell thinks is really hiding there, in black and white and red letters.

There was a country song recently, with a catchy chorus, catchy even for people who would never like country music on Facebook. "When you're goin' through hell, keep on goin'. Don't slow down, if you're scared don't show it. You might get out before the devil even knows you're there." There was another pop song, maybe twenty years earlier, so bad that you can't help but remember the chorus: "They say in heaven, love comes first. We'll make heaven a place on earth. Oh, heaven is a place on earth." If you put those two songs together, you'll have a really, really bad song... You also have the beginning of the message that Bell finds in the Bible.

Heaven and hell are real. There is nothing metaphorical about the joy or hell we go through. But they aren't 'places' we go after we die. On one hand, instead of living somewhere forever, the Bible uses the word "eternal" (or a-terminal, or not in measurable time) to describe the depth of life in God's grace. On the other hand, instead of a soul journey at death toward some heavenly skies or underground pit (the latter of which is the ancient Hebrew idea that Jesus and most Jews at his time had abandoned), the New Testament describes the experience, the pain and joy of being in or out of God's grace. Hell on earth is like fire, but the Bible does not say that some ethereal soul goes to some subterranean place to suffer magical fire for the rest of history itself. Heaven on earth is like a great worship service, but thank God the Bible does not say that we suffer through the drone of soul-organs looping How Great Thou Art forever!

The Psalms, prophets, Jesus, Paul all describe hell as something here on earth, and heaven as something real that God will bring to its full reality, here on earth. We do go through hell, but not forever—and here is where Bell reaches past those musical lyrics—because God is pulling us, all of us, the whole of existence, from the rotten pain of life, toward beauty and justice and community. The Bible tells the story, over and over, of

God redeeming the wrong and healing our brokenness. The fate of every person who ever lived is salvation, because God's love wins.

What about the Idea?

Rodney Atkins probably never considered himself very controversial, but if you take him at his word, hell on earth is about the second most controversial idea in Christianity, next to Belinda Carlisle's heaven on earth. Whatever the reasons, most Christians really like the idea of hell as a place for suffering forever after death. Some probably honestly and carefully read the Bible differently than Bell, and conclude that God actually sends people to some actual place. Good for them! I hope they take a lead in this discussion. Other Christians are so accustomed to earning everything in their lives—grades, affection, jobs—that they simply can't imagine religion or death any differently than some prize. Maybe heaven only matters to them if they work for it. Or maybe, as Donald Miller says, they are just too proud to receive God's grace. Jesus told a whole bunch of stories about why this is a crummy way to look at the world, but apparently people prefer his other stories about why gays and skateboarders go to hell.

Whatever their reasons for liking hell, many Christians believe something further: that hell as a place of suffering forever after death is a central point of doctrine for the Church. Some pastors sure do talk about it, and some middle school boys are even better than Hollywood or Dante at imagining what it might look like. Do you think those folks would be disappointed to learn that the word 'hell' in Hebrew was the name of the Jerusalem dump, without any long tradition of describing the supernatural world? Would they be disappointed that the word 'hell' only shows up 13 times in the Bible? Yeah, the whole Bible. And six of those tell us to cut off hands, feet and eyeballs that cause us to sin, lest looking at a pretty woman is the final straw that makes God throw us into hell. I sure hope this is Jesus' rhetorical flair! Since I don't see many one-footed, one-handed, cyclops fundamentalists, I have to assume they don't take those verses very 'literally' either.

Heaven, by the way, shows up 843 times in my Bible.

To be fair, there are a lot of passages that discuss life after death, judgment, eternity and the like. Maybe we just read differently than some people, but when Bell and I look through all of them, two things come clear. First, God offers something better than the crap that happens to us in life, something even better than the good things that happen in life. There is something about life with God that is far better than life without God, and God is really committed to that something, now and in the future. The second thing that comes clear is that the various writers in the Bible disagree a lot, a whole lot, about the details of that something. Who experiences it? What happens in it? When will it happen? Where can we look to learn more about it? Why did God send Jesus? How does it all work? It would sure be a whole lot easier if the Bible just laid it out there, but apparently God has more patience than us.

So, as a faithful Christian interpreting God's written Word, what are you supposed to believe about the fate of every person who ever lived? We can pick and choose the verses that make sense to our worldview and leave the other verses out, like painting a rainbow without red or yellow. That stuff Paul wrote to the church in Rome about "free gift" of God's grace is just metaphorical, after all, right? Or, we can look carefully for patterns and values and meanings in the context of God's story. Patterns like God's redemption come up over and over. Values of God's mercy to "all nations" echo in every part of the Bible.

For the sake of argument, let's say you give up the idea of hell as a place of suffering forever after death. Now what about heaven? What about heaven! If Christians like hell, they REALLY like their heaven! After all, what happens to grandma when she dies? And why did I just sit through 784 consecutive Sunday services? By throwing out Dante's cartoon of hell, has Rob Bell abandoned the idea of heaven as a place of joy forever after death? Has he given up the entire concept of an afterlife, even the good stuff, even the banquets and mansions and hanging out with dead rock stars? That's tough, so I'll let him answer in his own words:

"So when the gospel is diminished to a question of whether or not a person will 'get into heaven,' that reduces the good news to a ticket, a way to get past the bouncer and into the club. The good news is better than that." (page 178)

This explains why Bell is not technically a universalist. He doesn't believe God sends everyone to heaven, because he doesn't believe heaven is a place to be sent.

The cutest 6-year-old that never sat still during a children's sermon once gathered up all his courage and asked me, in one breath, "Where is heaven, how far is heaven, how long has God been in heaven, how old is heaven, how long would it take to fly there?" Bell thinks Christians have been reading the Bible like 6-year-olds, and it's time to return to the gospel as preached by Jesus, by the prophets before him and by his followers afterwards. I wish I was able to tell that boy what Bell tells us: "Heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be." (page 47)

What about the Book?

Whether you think that the central themes of "Love Wins" are demonic or that Rob Bell is the second coming of Christ, his book is not perfect. No book is. So, here are five areas where he could have improved.

First, despite the fact that the Bible does support his position, Bell doesn't do a great job arguing that. Sure, sure, he is a pastor, not an argumentative academic. But for all the accessibility that the book has, with poetic typesetting and a discernable lack of footnotes, careful readers would appreciate a better treatment of Biblical history and languages. In fancy terms, his 'exegesis' is weak, right where it should be strong (especially pages 31 & 42). For instance, although I agree with 98% what Bell has to

say about the Biblical usage of the phrases “eternal life” and “kingdom of heaven”, he said it in such poor ways that less supportive readers will, rightfully, take a long pause.

Second, Bell does a great job of laying out the various Bible verses that people cite to defend their understanding of heaven’s requirements. He does not do a good job, however, of saying how we are supposed to understand them under the context of earthly, non-judgmental heaven and hell. If Matthew 6 is not about the need to forgive others, in order to be forgiven by God, what the heck is it about? Specific interpretation like this is a horror for liberal evangelicals (not that fundamentalists have it all that easy trying to piece together their straightforward interpretations), but with such a powerful book, we deserve a better attempt.

Third, Karl Rahner, a well-intentioned 20th century German theologian, proposed that God saves everyone in the end, because their belief systems, as different as they seem, are really just religious translations of Christianity. Jews and Buddhists, for instance, don’t use the name Christ, but really, they’re barking up the same tree, with their own names and symbols. So, God welcomes those ‘anonymous Christians’ to salvation all the same. This idea should strike you as rather offensive, and Bell nudges dangerously close to it. To say Jesus, or the power of Christ, is present everywhere (page 144), is one thing. To say Jesus transcends any religious system, especially Christianity (page 150), is one thing. To say that some people come to God without referring to Jesus (page 159), is one thing. To say that Confucians, Mormons and atheists come the “Father” by Jesus, although Jesus referred to by other names (pages 154-155), that starts to be another thing. And it’s a short step to hold, as Rahner seems to have implied, that Muslims are saved ‘because’, for instance, their hajj to Mecca is really just another way of saying they believe in Christ. Sure, God can love and save a Muslim; that’s a major point of the book, after all. But besides skirting an offense to precisely the non-Christians Bell aims to defend here, these pages don’t fit well with Bell’s attempts to portray a God who has no requirements in any name, symbol or context.

Fourth, he isn’t quite clear about how our freedom and God’s desire to bring us to salvation fit together. At times Bell gives a lot of weight to our choices. For instance, “If we want nothing to do with love, we are given a reality free from love.” (page 117) But he also describes a God whose insatiable love outlasts us, not quite after death, but not quite in life either. Even if you agree that the Bible describes ‘that’ God’s love wins, we could have used another chapter about ‘how’ that happens.

Fifth, Bell writes, “Life has never been about just ‘getting in.’ It’s about thriving in God’s good world.” (page 179) I tend to agree with that quote. It sounds very John 10:10. But it’s only easy to stomach because he subtly, or inadvertently, includes that weasel word ‘just’. The good news might be better than a ticket to heaven for cool pastors with bestselling books and videos, but what is better for someone in the throes of stage four cancer? What do you say at a funeral? Pastoral care sure appreciates that ‘just’. And the Scriptural ambiguity that allows Bell the room to converse with mainstream

Christians about this whole topic must be open enough to hold onto Biblical hope for some sense of life after death, in addition to abundant life now.

What Now?

A hip pastor in 2011 did not invent the idea that heaven and hell are religious states of being on earth. Outside the Bible, all sorts of dead guys you might remember from college went that route. The list on page 107 could be expanded a lot. Academic theologians talk about this sort of thing all the time. Plenty of pastors talk about it when they are at conferences, safely away from their congregations. But "Love Wins" is the most powerful popular defense we've seen, maybe ever. It isn't as precise as Tillich, or nearly as authoritative as Augustine, but Rob Bell is cool enough to pull it off! Whether you like him or want to punch his glasses in, he has seized America's religious imagination like no one in a while, like no one since Mister Rogers or Mother Theresa or Pope John Paul. So, what now?

Will "Love Wins" strengthen the faith of open-minded Christians, perhaps drawing them into real study of the Bible? Will it bring non-believers to church, or at least back into conversation with the Christian faith? Will it ease anxiety about death and afterlife and salvation? Or by making God a little less scary, will it open a door for people to pray more deeply? On the other hand, how will it affect those loud pastors who thrive off controversy? Most interesting to me, how will it affect the millions of Americans who subscribe to that fundamentalist agenda? Will they sneak a look at the book, or its ideas, like sacred pornography? Will it give them the courage to challenge their Pharisaic litany of anti-gay, anti-sex, anti-gay-sex, anti-tax, anti-poor, pro-power-of-me? In other words, will "Love Wins" serve merely as another Christian guilty pleasure, like Mel Gibson's "The Passion", or is it pushing the Christian faith up against a tipping point of genuine reform?

Rob Bell is not Constantine or Martin Luther, and "Love Wins" is not "Summa Theologica" or Calvin's "Institutes". But God is at work here. How else do you explain that Twitter thing? More popular than Charlie Sheen!