

## **Book Review: Love Wins by Rob Bell**

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Last month, a new book came out about heaven and hell by a pastor named Rob Bell. While some may be unfamiliar with him, he has a large amount of influence in the church world. His church is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and it is a larger church. More than all of this, he has recently been called a rock star in Christianity. Some might wonder why a person like me would write a review about the book, seeing that I haven't written a book review since my college days eons ago (about two-and-a-half years). I could answer with a wry smile tongue and cheek, "Well, everyone else is doing it..." And indeed, there are several good and thorough reviews of this book.

But I will not lambast the whole of the book, as most are doing. I believe it has at least a bit of value for us to consider. Most of the book simply questions what most of us have been taught about heaven and hell and eternity. You will find that it is the style of postmodern culture to discourage labeling, especially theologically or socially, and that they also love to ask questions that spur good conversations. These are two elements of postmodernism that I agree with and enjoy. In fact, most people who ask me a question about the Bible or God or anything else will be led on a journey of questions. The difference is that I attempt to give the best answer I know of to those questions eventually. My goal in answering a question is to help people think through options rather than force them to only hear what I have chosen as an option.

However, when Rob Bell asks questions, he has a way of making a statement in the question. He tends to force you to respond to a rhetorical question the way that he wants to frame the "conversation" so that instead of facilitating conversation and discussion, he simply co-opts you into his view without stating his view so you can't label him and then debate his stance. I would refer to this as propositional questioning or programmatic questioning. You don't get to hear three or four possibilities in the question. You are given two, neither of which may be very appealing. And so, much like in our political system, you are forced to choose the lesser of two evils, which is what Rob Bell wants you to choose, and the "conversation" (lecture) goes on without skipping a beat.

I am a firm believer that critical thinking can be taught through questions. But I am also a firm believer that there are answers to most questions. We ask questions to understand better. So I have no problems with questions. In fact, there are no stupid questions. But there are wrong questions, questions that lead to wrong conclusions, sometimes on purpose. I think that Bell tends to ask wrong or loaded questions that take us down only one road. I also don't like labels because, just like giving a person a number, they make us less human, less unique. If you put me in a theological cage with a label, and I differ from that framework, then I am a rebel or a heretic based on that system, when I basically think

for myself, take some of the good in many systems and am completely unique.

Now let us get to the book itself. What do I like about the book or see that is good in the book? And what do I dislike about the book? I will go through each section first speaking about the positives and then the negatives. First, heaven. Then, hell. Then, the middle chapters. Then, the concluding chapters. Bell starts out by reaching out to those who are scorned or find themselves at odds with orthodox Christianity, with the belief that heaven and hell are major parts of the belief system. So in the very beginning we see the audience of this book. It is not the unsaved who are interested in spiritual things, which is who most books on heaven and hell have targeted. It is to those who don't like the heaven and hell option in Christianity. By the way, that's a small amount of Christianity, the people on the fringes.

Bell next starts with heaven in chapter two. What I like about the chapter is that he takes great pains to express a dissatisfaction with the constant teaching of what he calls "entrance theology," the idea that the only thing that matters about heaven is that you get into heaven later. I like his points on this because it shouldn't be only about getting in to heaven. The Christian life is much more than just getting in to heaven. It is about living for Christ now, experiencing the Christ-life now. It's not about just getting a ticket that gets you in the door. It's about showing people why it's worth being in heaven.

What didn't I like about his views of heaven? Well, Bell states through a bunch of forced questions that he believes heaven is here and now rather than somewhere over there or out there or somewhere else. While this view helps to encourage us to live better

for God here and now, it presents a myopic view of eternity. I think Bell's point is to push eternity off as far as possible so that people have more opportunity to accept Christ, as we will talk about a bit later. In the chapter, he spends much time developing the idea that the Greek word for eon means "a period of time" rather than "eternity" or "forever" as he is looking at the Rich Young Ruler's question about how to receive "eternal life." Now the problem that Bell runs into is that the chief meaning in most contexts where eon is used in the New Testament is "eternal" or "time without end" not "a period of time" with a beginning and end. One blogger, Tim Challies points out that John 3:16 has the word eon to talk about "eternal life" and it would be disconcerting to read "...whoever believes in Him will not perish but have life for a period of time." So most commonly eon is used for eternity rather than a period of time. Doing a proper word study avoids using erroneous claims as part of the substance to back up main points.

But heaven is not here. This world is fallen. The people in it are stained with sin. And Rob Bell thinks very highly of humanity where I would be more cautious. We all have the image of God but it is extremely marred by the fall of humanity. Heaven is not here. There are times when we experience God's presence in a real way, and that is a taste of heaven, but heaven is something to look forward to, a reward for a life lived in obedience to God and a life of persecution for Christ and righteousness. Glimpses of heaven are here, but heaven is much better than here. As a friend reminded me, Rob Bell loves to tell stories in the chapters and usually tells about horrific things that people have gone through. Doesn't that prove my point, that because of fallenness and sin here and now, there is no way this can be heaven?

Next, hell. What did I like about his chapter on hell? I liked the image and idea and application that hell is here in the sense of how we treat one another. I think that this is true. Through our choice to treat one another the way Christ commands or the way we used to treat others creates an atmosphere of hell for others and ourselves. One person told me an adage that went something close to, "Being here on earth is the worst bit of hell that Christians will taste, and for unbelievers, this place is as much heaven as they will see." This holds some truth, I believe, for our actions and the consequences of those actions. However, it is not only our horizontal relationship with other human beings that causes earth to be like hell for some here and now, but also, as Bell neglects to point out, our vertical relationship with God here and now that affects eternity.

Rob Bell is allergic to eternity in this book. Eternity pretty much doesn't exist to him because he keeps pushing it off with his eons arguments and his continual attempt to push the idea that hell is here and now. Another easy point to make is in this question: How can both heaven and hell be here and now? He does go on in the middle chapters and end chapters to present a bit of how he imagines this can be. My problem with the book in general is that Rob Bell refuses to take this acknowledgement of here and now and speak of heaven and hell in eternity. He also makes it a point that there aren't many verses about heaven and hell that give us a complete understanding of them, so we can't completely define what the afterlife is going to be like. But I would state that the Bible is quite clear and complete about the parts that matter to our eternal destiny.

Next, the middle chapters, concerning God's greatness and theories about the atonement. In chapter four, I found almost nothing that I liked. The reason for this is that this is the chapter in which Rob Bell attempts his very best to push the Christian Universalism theory forward. And he does it in the crassest way! He opens by asking if God really gets what He wants. Then he states that the Bible is clear that God wants all to be saved. That much is true. But then he asks if God is great, and how great God is. Is God great enough to save everyone, as He wills, or will some go to hell and make God less great? This is a serious derivation from orthodoxy, and I don't want to throw the blasphemy word around, but it's so close I might have to!

There are two issues that upset me in this chapter. First, questioning God's greatness is never a good road to go down. When we begin to question God's greatness, or to question God, we turn out like the serpent in the garden asking Eve, "Did God really say...?" That is what it sounds like here when Rob Bell begins a question with the same dangerous tone of "Is God really great...?" The answer is always yes. God really is great. Always. Without question. Absolutely. Never question God's greatness. We don't want to get so friendly with God that we question things about Him and His nature that would force Him to get a little transcendent on us and cause us great pain and discipline from His hand. We must remember our place!

Second, Bell has no use for a common understanding of this verse that says God wills that everyone might be saved. Many scholars and theologians gladly accept that there are at least two facets to God's will, His decreed will that definitely happens, and his desiring will, which does not always

happen. Here's why sometimes God's will is not heeded. He gave humans free will, so we don't always do what is best for us. We don't always choose God's best or agree with Him. And because of free will, our choice is what God accepts. God is no less great because a person chooses hell instead of heaven. Rather than ask if God is really great when people go to hell, I would ask, how could humans be so depraved as to want the worst instead of God's best?

In chapter five, Rob Bell next talks about different theories of atonement, which are ways to explain what happened on the cross. I like how he stresses multiple theories of atonement in this chapter. There are different ways the New Testament gives us, different images, of how Christ's death affects the world and history. The penal substitutionary atonement theory is probably pretty familiar to us, which is the idea that Jesus took our place (substitutionary) and took the penalty of death that sin requires (penal) upon the cross. Bell sees this as subtly teaching that the loving Jesus saves us from the angry and violent avenging God! But we'll get to that in a moment. I like that other theories, like the legal theory of justification, or the end of the sacrificial system touted in Hebrews, or the relational image of Jesus reconciling all things or that it is the victory of God over death and sin. The cross event was the biggest event in the cosmos to the first Christians. It deserved more than one facet or image or framework for what it did in the whole universe. I agree with this wholeheartedly!

But then there's this issue of the loving Jesus saving us from the avenging and wrathful God. Does penal substitutionary atonement teach this? Absolutely not! If people are getting that, there is something wrong with the sender of the message! We

must remember, as Bell fails to point out, that God is a holy God and that we are sinful people. For a holy God to be able to be present with us, sin must be eradicated. Jesus does that through this theory, as the sinless perfect Son of God, the only Person innocent who could take our sin away. Loving Jesus and avenging God are one in the same. When Jesus dies on the cross and takes that penalty away, it is through love. And God loves us by being with us and putting His Holy Spirit in us as His temples. Because Jesus died on the cross, God can dwell with us. This is love, that God made a way where only He could! It has nothing to do with good cop bad cop.

Also, Rob Bell tends to point out Scriptures that deal with "everyone" or "all people" being reconciled to God as a case for universalism. The problem with this is that most of the time when the Bible uses these inclusive words, it is in an exclusive context. For instance, sometimes "all people" is specifically referring to "all of the people of God." Always be aware of the context when you see the word all in the Bible. It can be all in one group, which is not all as in everything you can possibly think of or imagine. Many of the statements about all people and all nations are surrounded with qualifications or criterion or conditions.

Last, the last chapters, concerning Jesus is everywhere and the Gospel is better than entrance theology. In chapter six, I could find little to settle me while reading because Rob Bell, as he has done throughout the book, tends to do some funky interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes, when people say, "I've never heard it preached that way" it's a good thing because their perspectives are being expanded to think about God in greater ways. That's good preaching. But, other times when people say, "I've never

heard it taught that way,” it’s because it is wrong and most of church leadership and history have tossed it to the dogs.

This is how I feel about Rob Bell’s imitation of half-baked exegesis in this chapter and the next. Exegesis is the way that we study the text to mine the gold found in its message. Rob Bell presents to us the typology of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 where Paul proclaims that the rock that Moses struck to get water from in the desert was Jesus. “That rock is Christ.” Now, Rob Bell takes this as a *carte blanche* statement that allows him then to say that we can find Christ in any cultural image or situation. That is not how to take this passage at all.

Just because Paul sees Christ in the Old Testament, in Scripture, as Jesus Himself taught us to do, does not mean that we can see Christ in culture. Bell seems to be uneducated at least in practice about typologies and images that foreshadow Christ. The reason that Paul says the rock is Christ is because the Israelites needed provision in the desert, and God supernaturally provided that need in the form of water out of an unusual source. This is to say, not that Christ is the rock, but that Christ is our supernatural source of provision for our needs in our lives. Christ is the Living Water just like the water that provided for the Israelites in the desert. Bell goes on to say that because Christ is in each culture that people can come to Him without realizing His name or that it is Christ. So there are many rocks around us, many images of Jesus that we can come to God through.

He actually then says that people can come to Jesus through Buddha, Hinduism, and other religions! That is not orthodox Christianity in any sense! Those are

completely other ways! And they don’t lead to the Father. I wondered as I read on stunned if Bell would talk about one of the most exclusive claims of Christ, that of John 14:6. And of course he decided to mutilate that text as well with an argument that it actually teaches Christ’s universality and inclusivity rather than exclusivity. I didn’t even understand his argument or his exegesis. You can’t have it both ways. Either Christ is exclusive in His claims or He is not. Bell failed to mention any other exclusive claims, such as the narrow gate passage, the wise man who built his house on the rock, or many others that you can find throughout the New Testament.

In chapters seven and eight, Bell concludes by reinterpreting the parable of the Prodigal Son with the framework he gave in the beginning about heaven and hell being here and now in the choices we make rather than in eternity. So he states that both sons are in hell because they have chosen their story instead of the Father’s. The one runs away, taking what he inherits and squandering it, and seeing himself as a slave rather than a son. But the father tells the son that he is still a son when he returns. That is the surprise. The father’s story is different than the son’s.

And so hell is choosing our story of ourselves over God’s story of us. The other son has another story that is also hell to him because he believes that he has earned sonship instead of already owning it. But the father has a different story in the words, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” The son already had these things and didn’t need to earn them. We’re already forgiven and saved. We don’t need to earn it. So hell is not accepting that we’re already saved? That is also not orthodox theology. And if everyone’s already saved,

then why do I have to witness? But when you look at the context of that parable, it is in a section of three parables that stress the joy of someone who is lost being found. It is not about living in hell now. It is about the urgency of finding the lost now, as soon as possible!

I want to conclude by saying that I have attempted to show that there are some beneficial parts to this book that did serve to make me think and to show different perspectives. But the driving force of the book cannot be accepted because it is anything but orthodox. As a pastor, I hope that this serves as a prophetic warning to be careful about what we accept. Let us think critically about what we read and the conversations we have. I am not the Judge who decides the eternal destinies of the masses, or of even a single person. I believe that it's hard to know if someone is truly saved because it's not up to any of us. Let us leave the fate of others between God and them. And let us do our best to understand through what we can observe who the saints are. We truly don't know it all this side of heaven.

What we believe has everything to do with how we live and our practices! My objective is not to say I'm better than Rob Bell or that I'm right and he's wrong. My objective is to present to the Body of Christ my own gleanings from the book. Rob Bell is very influential, and if he is not teaching orthodox and godly doctrine, someone must be prophetic and speak to the issues in a Scriptural and Spirit-led way but also with love and gentleness. Let us continually focus on Christ and spur one another on to positive and God-honoring thinking and worship of Him!