

A Review of Rob Bell's Book: Love Wins

Written by Bill Perkins

Rob Bell's bestselling book, *Love Wins* has stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy. He's done this by asking questions in ways that cut deep, exposing raw muscle, bone and tendon. For instance, he asks, "Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few years of life?"

This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God; it raises questions about the beliefs themselves. Why them? Why you? Why me? Why not him or her or them? Are there only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate?" (p. 2-3).

These questions are just the opening salvo of a book with hundreds of such questions. Questions that cause the reader to challenge the very idea that a loving God could send people to a horrible place like hell.

Questions With Commentary

But it's not just Bell's questions that surface hidden tensions in the Christian faith. So does his commentary. After talking about the idea that millions have been taught that if someone doesn't believe in the way the person telling them the gospel does, and if they died later that day, "God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell.

God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony.

If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities. If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately. If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted, let alone be good" (pp. 173-174).

I've seldom read a book that surfaces crucial issues in such an emotional and powerful way. The questions come so fast and furious that it would take a volume much longer than Bell's to provide answers that counterbalance the weight of his conclusions . . . conclusions that imply hell is here on earth in the here and now as well as something experienced after physical death.

Conclusions that indicate such a God would be a monster, worse than a parent who abuses a child.

It's not that Bell says God is a monster, but his questions and commentary lead the reader to conclude a God who sends people to a place of eternal torment would be a monster.

And if that's the glaring conclusion a reader would reach, and since God can't be like that, then there must be another meaning of hell that is consistent with a loving God. There must be a way to heaven that "leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He (Jesus) is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe. He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation" (p. 155).

Making Scripture Say What He Wants

While Bell is often fuzzy about what he believes, one thing that's clear in his writing is that he craves answers that will sit well with people because they show God as an all-loving father who would never hurt anyone. In order to do this he took biblical passages and words and changed their meaning so they would say what he wanted them to (p. 31-32). And this he did without supporting references while ignoring the combined translations of the world's greatest biblical scholars.

He claims he's not a universalist (believing Christ died for all and so all will be saved), but the book indicates he thinks everyone will have a chance to believe here on earth and other chances after death. He says there is a "place" called hell, but it's certainly not a place of torment as it's been historically viewed.

Bell believes Jesus Christ is the only way to God but he said that Jesus, "doesn't state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him" (p. 154). What does that mean? The reader is left to ponder the question because Bell doesn't explain what he means.

A Comforting Conclusion

For the person troubled by the idea of a loved one, or even a stranger, spending eternity suffering in a literal hell—and who isn't—Bell's message offers comfort: God is love and love always wins either in this life or the next. Of course, winning for Bell means God gets what he wants, which is for every person to end up in heaven. He defends this idea by quoting 1 Timothy 2:32, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (p. 97).

That verse is followed by these questions: "So does God get what God wants? How great is God? Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do. Or kind of great, medium great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great. . . . Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, marvelous God fail in the end?" (pp. 87-98).

Bell wants the reader to conclude that since God is so great he'll make sure everyone gets saved. After all, that's what God wants.

The Will of God, Distorted

His use of 1 Timothy 2:3-4 illustrates how he distorts the meaning of a verse in order to prove his point. While I suspect Bell knows the difference between the sovereign/certain will of God and the desires of God, he makes no attempt to make the distinction when referencing this passage. How much different would 1 Timothy 2:3-4 appear to the reader if Bell had pointed out that the sovereign/certain will of God refers to the fact that God ordains everything that comes to pass (Ephesians 1:11; Acts 4:27-28).

This doesn't mean God causes everything to happen. Instead, it acknowledges that he permits everything to happen and everything that happens is a part of his sovereign will. The desires of God speak of what God, as a person, desires. Could a father want his son to follow in his vocational footsteps without forcing him to do so? Of course. Similarly, God desires all men to live righteous lives without sin. Yet, people sin daily. Does the presence of sin in the world mean God is weak. Not at all.

Let's apply that line of reasoning to salvation. God wants all men to be saved. But the Bible teaches all men will not be saved (Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 13:47-50). Accepting God's offer of life is up to the individual and many people choose not to embrace God's gift. Does this make God less great? Not at all. It means God does not impose his wishes or desires on his creatures.

This is one instance of how Bell uses an inaccurate meaning of words and verses to build an unstable foundation upon which he constructs a view of heaven, hell and faith. As I read the book I spotted scores of instances where Bell failed to apply sound expositional and research principles to his explanations. While I enjoyed Bell's book, he is wrapping a belief in universalism in the jargon and cultural views of the 21st century.

For Further Reading

My desire isn't to write an exhaustive review of Bell's book, since other have done an excellent job. I just wanted to state my impression of his work in order to give you a basis for further study yourself.

If you'd like some more extensive reviews check out the following links:

<http://www.bloggingtheologically.com/2011/03/09/book-review-love-wins-by-rob-bell/>

<http://shawnwoodwrites.com/blog/a-review-of-love-wins-by-rob-bell/>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/april/lovewins.html>