

Who Defines God's Love?

The Slippery Slope of Liberal Theology A look at Rob Bell's book: "Love Wins"



By Brian Brodersen, associate pastor of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa

After reading several reviews and articles and watching a couple of interviews with Rob Bell on his book *Love Wins*, I decided that it was time to read it myself. I can't say that I was really surprised by anything in the book. It actually proved the point that I made in my previous critique of *Velvet Elvis*: that Rob was on the slippery slope of theological liberalism. *Love Wins* just shows how quickly one can go from flirting with liberal theology to embracing it fully.

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It is not my intention to give a detailed critique of the book, but rather to show why Rob Bell is an unreliable source when it comes to what the Bible teaches about God, heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who has ever lived.

Preface

In the preface to the book, Rob claims the story of Jesus has been hijacked by people who believe and teach that those who reject Christ will suffer eternal punishment. In a style reminiscent of Brian McLaren, Bell sets himself alongside those—not thousands, tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, but “millions,” he claims—who reject this hijacking. He refers to this view on hell and eternal punishment, which has been held throughout history by the vast majority of theologians, pastors, and Christians in general, as “misguided and toxic” and says that it “ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy ...” (page

viii). Is it possible that Rob sees himself as somewhat of a hero who has come to set the record straight and recover the hijacked story of Jesus?

Here are his exact words:

“First, I believe that Jesus's 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 everybody, everywhere. ... There are a growing number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus's story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn't interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what he came to do. The plot has been lost, and it's time to reclaim it. I've written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, 'I would never be a part of that.' You are not alone. There are millions of us. ... It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief [about hell] is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy” (pages vii-viii).

At the close of the preface Rob assures his readers that he is not teaching anything radical or new or that hasn't been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before him. He refers to his views as the views of the historic, orthodox Christian faith. It is hard to believe Rob Bell, an educated man, really believes what he stated there.

The real issue once again is: what does the Bible say? For that is what we will be using to determine whether the real story of Jesus includes teaching on eternal punishment or not.

Chapter 1: What About the Flat Tire?

The chapter title is related to the idea expressed by Rob that if the missionary's tire gets a flat, then the poor heathen who

have never heard of Jesus Christ or His Gospel are out of luck and have to spend eternity in hell.

The story of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, found in Acts 10, shows us that wherever there is an open heart or an enquiring soul, God will get the message of salvation to them even if He needs to send an angel. The reality is no one who wants to have their sins forgiven and go to heaven will miss out because the missionary gets a flat tire.

According to Paul in Romans 1, all men have sufficient evidence for God's existence to move them to seek further revelation. As men respond in faith to general revelation (creation), God sends special revelation (the Gospel), and He has unlimited resources available to get the message to the one seeking it.

Let me quote and respond to a few of the more provocative statements expressed in this chapter.

“Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number 'make it to a better place' and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?” (page 2).

Jesus said, **“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it”** (Matthew 7:13-14). Jesus also said, **“many are called, but few are chosen”** (Matthew 22:14), and the context is clearly salvation.

Yes, sad as it is, most people will be damned. Not because they could not have been saved, not because God did not want them to be saved, but because they chose to reject the

revelation God had given them and in doing so reject Christ, the only Savior.

Is this acceptable to God? Well, we know it is not pleasurable to God. God said through the prophets that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). But sin separates us from God's holy presence. So one must repent of sin and receive Christ as their Lord and Savior in order to be rescued from the consequences of sin: death and eternal separation from God in hell.

Another troubling thing in Rob's statement on the previous page is the way Rob suggests that God cannot punish people eternally and still be a loving God. I hate to break the news, but that is exactly what the Bible claims to be the case.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” John 3:16-18, 36

He goes on to ask, *“Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things that they did in their few finite years of life?” (page 2).*

The answer is yes, He does. But before you think that's a bit harsh, let's think for a moment about some of the things people

have done in “their few finite years of life.” Adolf Hitler lived a brief 56 years and in that time was responsible for the deaths of millions of his fellow human beings. The same is true of Joseph Stalin, who died at 74, and Mao Zedong, who died at 82. Ted Bundy personally sexually assaulted and murdered at least 30 young women before the age of 40, and Jeffrey Dahmer sexually assaulted and murdered 17 men and boys by the age of 30.

Obviously not everyone is a mass murderer or a psychopathic killer, but every person who ever lives past childhood has a list of offenses miles long, and most refuse to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for these offenses. This is the humanity the Bible describes and condemns as worthy of damnation, but amazingly it's also the humanity that Christ died to deliver from damnation.

Because Rob Bell doesn't really believe the entire Bible to be the Word of God, he feels free to pick and choose the parts he likes and that support his view and disregard the parts he doesn't like. He does this throughout the entire book. He emphasizes

one aspect of God's nature—His love—to the exclusion of other aspects of His nature, particularly holiness. He does the same thing with the Scriptures, emphasizing those passages that speak of God's love to the exclusion of those that speak of holiness, wrath, and judgment.

Finally, he consistently misrepresents the historic position on the doctrine of eternal punishment by putting forth a caricature of those who uphold the traditional view as being self-righteous bigots who arrogantly and heartlessly rejoice over the damned. ☹

For part 2, along with the rest of Brian's critique, go to the Back to Basics website (<http://b2b.cccm.com/blog/44-blog/242-a-look-at-rob-bells-book-love-wins-part-2>).

*All quotes from Rob Bell are taken from *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011).

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