

Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, New York: HarperOne, 2011. 224 pages. \$24.99.

Providing a review of Rob Bell's *Love Wins* represents a challenge. The reaction to its publication was visceral rejection by some and celebrated welcome by others. Any review at this point must acknowledge the media sensation around its publication as much as the book itself. HarperOne released an easily found 2:58 minute promotional video which presents the argument of the book in succinct form. It begins with Bell walking toward viewers in a snow filled Michigan alley, conversationally posing a question that is anything but pedestrian: "Will only a few select people make it to heaven? And will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell?"

In the book he writes, "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?

If there are 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?

What kind of faith is that?

Or, more important:

What kind of God is that?" (2-3)

This version of the Christian message, he says, makes the gospel a story in which Jesus is cast as the one, through his death on the cross, who rescues us from a wrathful God. So what kind of God is that? When talking with atheists Bell finds he typically doesn't believe in the God they reject either. For Bell, Christianity's core message and the God he believes in assures us that "love wins." God's love triumphs over any reductionist version of theology that would make the fear of hell the only reason people should have a hope of heaven.

The evangelical Protestant church was atwitter before the book was released with pastor John Piper's tweeting "Farewell, Rob," dismissing both the book and the author as someone now unworthy to have further influence among evangelical Protestants. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, warned Southern Baptist students that the book was not just bad doctrine, but the very loss of the gospel itself. At the Southern Baptist Convention that June considerable time was devoted to craft and vote on a resolution that affirmed continued "belief in the biblical teaching on eternal, conscious punishment of the unregenerate in Hell." At stake for the Southern Baptists and all traditionalists is the essential nature of evangelistic outreach: abandon hell and we abandon the message of salvation from hell. If one surrenders the idea of an infinity of endless punishment, the argument goes, then we surrender Christian belief that sin fundamentally estranges people from God. If that conviction is conceded they believe Christian confidence in a righteous God who must find a means to save us from our sin is lost.

This is the subtext of the media uproar. It is the reason that, even though Bell clearly affirms his belief in a biblical notion of judgment, his distractors consistently label his argument as universalism. Traditionalists believe that presenting "love wins" as the essence of the gospel vitiates the need to preach repentance of sin. At the very least, admitting love wins in the end would likely make seekers and converts too complacent about approaching life and faith as an utterly either-or commitment with regard to how they live.

Whether or not one self-identifies as evangelical, mainline, liberal, post-evangelical, or some other Christian label, the argument matters because Bell has tapped into the *zeitgeist* question: Does embracing pluralism mean we should reject seemingly provincial assumptions in our faith? Bell faces this question while trying to hold on to the mystery of Christian faith. The question at the heart of the book is whether one can place faith in a God who can be wholly righteous? Do we believe in a God who calls everyone to understand that when the end comes, what comes is judgment and happy are those found having lived with the concerns of God guiding them?

When it comes to the biblical concept of hell, Bell concludes that we still,

...need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good true and beautiful life that God has for us. We need a word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within 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. (93)

If pushed, Bell argues that there is hell now and hell later, but that at heart, "Hell is our refusal to trust God's retelling of our story.... What the gospel does is confront our version of our story with God's version of our story." (170-71) This Christianity becomes a participation in the unfinished story of Jesus' life and ministry. And like Jesus, we can either trust our version of the way the story should go, or we can trust God. "We do ourselves great harm," he writes, "when we confuse the very essence of God, which is love, with the very real consequences of resisting that love, which creates what we call hell." (177)

Traditionalists are alarmed that in his effort to communicate with contemporary seekers, Bell has surrendered the atonement. He disagrees. But his subtext may preach more loudly than his argument. Progressives may wonder what's really new here. What's new is how Bell has put his finger on the *Zeitgeist* of the mystery of faith for a new generation willing to accept that their neighbor can be a person of faith even though her faith is different than theirs.

A year out, HarperOne lists *Love Wins* as its second biggest seller of the year. Tim Tebow's *Through My Eyes* sold more books for HarperOne in 2011. That gives me pause to wonder whether the traditionalists may have a right to be concerned about making the gospel too palatable. But Bell's book is sandwiched right there, second on the list, followed by the perennial C.S. Lewis bestseller—*Mere Christianity*. Between these two maybe the porridge is just right.

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