

Love Wins: Rob Bell's Challenge to Hell

Rob Bell is a leader and speaker who founded Mars Hill Church, Grand Rapids, USA. His recent book on Hell 'Love Wins' was surrounded by a huge publicity drive and within a day was number five in the Amazon sales rankings. The book presents itself as a series of thoughtful questions and reflections, which challenge the traditional doctrine of hell. Though none of the arguments in Love Wins are original, the style and form of the book is. The questioning style is calculated to fit with modern secular fashion, and as such forms a key aspect of Bell's strategy. There have been a number of reviews of Bell's work; this seminar highlights the seminal significance of Bell's communication method alongside assessing his content.

Peter Sanlon holds theology degrees from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. His PhD was on Augustine's preaching and doctrine of scripture. He has published various studies, including: Plastic People: How Queer Theory Is Changing Us (London: Latimer Trust, 2010), Bringing Emotions to the Surface in Ministry (Anvil 26, no. 3&4, 2009: p.231-42), An Augustinian Mindset (Themelios 33, no. 1, 2008: p.39-45), The Embers of Preaching and the Flames of Piety (Churchman 120, no. 1, 2006, 57-69). Peter has worked as a speech writer in the House of Lords and a political campaign manager. Peter is an assistant minister in an inner city London parish, alongside being a lecturer in Church History and Doctrine at Oak Hill College.

1. Introduction

A. Promotional Video

‘At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.’ p.109

B. Apologetic Aim shapes style - Seeks to persuade intended audience of secularist, uninformed and disaffected post-Christian.

C. Method - Affirming secularism & Discarding Biblical Doctrine

‘Here that we run up against Bell's hermeneutic, that is, the principle by which he decides if a biblical teaching is relevant. Why, for example, is blood atonement a time-bound explanation of the Cross, but the divinity of Christ is a deep mystery we shouldn't shun? Why are Paul's statements about the universality of salvation taken literally, but his teaching on substitutionary atonement as mere creative writing?’

If there is a criterion driving these distinctions, it seems to be based on what Bell thinks contemporary people can swallow. I couldn't see any other criteria at play.’
Mark Gali, Christianity Today, April 2011.

D. Just asking Questions?

350 questions in 200 pages of (very large) type.

‘This isn’t just a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions.’
p.19

2. The traditional doctrine which Bell never explains

3. Rob Bell is positive about:

A. This present world setting the agenda p.50;

‘Hell is our refusal to trust God’s retelling of our story’ p.170

‘We need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and 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. And *for that*, the word ‘hell’ works quite well. Let’s keep it.’ p.93

B. Endless post-death second chances:

‘The gates of that city will never be shut... If the gates are never shut, then people are free to come and go’. p.114-5.

C. Sovereignty of human will

‘We get what we want’. p.118

D. Purgatorial cleansing: Goats of Mt. 25 sent to ‘pruning and trimming of the branches’ so they ‘can flourish’. p.91.

E. ‘Universalistic’ texts e.g. p.134-5; p.99-101: ‘We’re all part of the one family’

But Rom 5?

F. Jesus transcending any boundary:

'He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain and name him, especially the one called Christianity... Jesus is supracultural. He is present within all cultures, and yet outside of all cultures.' p.150-1.

G. Secular virtue e.g. single mother p. 53-4; white light p.141.

4. Use of Bible

A. Word Study on 'Hell'

Ignores Isa. 66 and Dan. 12. Ignores implications of 2 Tim. 1:10.

'The actual word "hell" is used roughly twelve times in the NT... And that's it. Anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word "hell" in the Bible they got from those verses.' p.67; 69.

B. Sodom & Gomorrah - Mat.10:15 means there is hope for them p.84.

'It is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.' *Article 20*

C. The Rock - Exodus 17; 1 Cor. 10:4

'Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere'. p.144
Smoking pot p.139; Bright white light p.141.

D. Prodigal Son - Luke 16

Elder brother creates his own hell. 'In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping into each other. If the elder brother were off alone sulking, he would be alone in his own hell... Hell is our refusal to trust God's retelling of our story' p.170

5. Doctrine of God

A. Discerns correctly this is the key issue. 'Does God get what God wants?' p.95ff.

B. 1 Tim. 2:4 'Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants?

Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God fail in the end?' p.98

C. God of evangelical belief is evil:

'Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way... and that if they are hit by a car and died later that same 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 like that, we would call the authorities...

If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like that could ever be trusted, let alone be good. Loving one moment, vicious the next. Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die? That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can.

And that is the secret deep in the heart of many people, especially Christians: they don't love God. They can't, because the God they have been presented with and taught about can't be loved. That God is traumatizing and unbearable." p.173-5.

God would be defeated if people remained in hell being punished for sin. People freely chose to reject God's love now, and 'we can assume it will be taken in the future' p.114. But in the end 'Untold numbers of serious disciples of Jesus have trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit for ever, because God's love will melt even the hardest of hearts'. p.108.

6. Doctrine of Judgment

A. Judgment will be the end of evil and suffering

‘The day when God says, “ENOUGH!” to anything that threatens the peace, harmony and health that God intends for the world. God says no to injustice, God says “Never again,” to the oppressors who prey of the weak and vulnerable. God declares a ban on weapons.’ p.37

1. No mention of retribution or justice - only suffering would be purgatorial (p.91)
2. God being rescuer excludes God's being the wrath bearer - ‘Let's be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin and destruction.’ p.182
3. Hell cannot be everlasting. Not only would it make God evil, ‘Forever is not really a category the biblical writers used’. p.92

7. The use and abuse of Power in Apologetics

- A. Bell wants his view to be accepted as mainstream Christian belief:

‘Some stories are better than others.’ “Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn't a very good story. Telling a story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn't a very good story. In contrast, everybody enjoying God's good world together with no disgrace or shame, justice being served, and all the wrongs being made right is a better story. It is bigger, more loving, more expansive, more extraordinary, beautiful, and inspiring than any other story about the ultimate course history takes. Whatever objections a person might have to this story, and there are many, one has to admit that it is fitting, proper, and Christian to long for what God longs for. . . To shun, censor, or ostracize someone for holding this belief is to fail to extend grace to each other in a discussion that has had plenty of room for varied perspectives for hundreds of years now.” p.112-3

- B. Does Bell extend this grace he demands when he describes the traditional view's God as: a “cruel, mean, vicious tormenter” and who, if he were an earthly dad, should be

reported to “child protection services immediately”? (p.175-6) This God is further described as “angry, demanding, [and] a slave driver.” p.185

- a. Fails to represent view he rejects fairly and associates others with worst possible behavior
- b. Personal experiences used to silence other views p.71
- c. Worst case examples of other views e.g. p.63, 95
- d. False choices forced on reader e.g. p.46 (Engagement with this life or traditional view of heaven); p. 82 (Jesus talked either about doctrinal beliefs or aimed to impact people’s present behavior.)
- e. Withholding citations and context to misrepresent e.g. Letter from Luther p.106.
- f. Generalizations and misrepresentations

e.g. Origen at the center of Christian church? p.107-9

Presents Augustine as supporting his views with comment: ‘Augustine acknowledged that “very many” believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God.’ p.108.

I now have to engage in a debate, devoid of rancor, those compassionate Christians who refuse to believe that the punishment of hell will be everlasting either in the case of all those men whom the completely just Judge accounts deserving of that chastisement, or at least in the case of some of them; they hold that they are to be set free after fixed limits of time have been passed, the periods being longer or shorter in proportion to the magnitude offenses. On this subject the most compassionate of all was Origen who believed that the Devil himself and his angels will be rescued from their torments and brought into the company of the holy angels, after the more severe and more lasting chastisements appropriate to their deserts. But the Church has rejected Origen's teaching, and not without good reason. *City of God*, 21:17.

- g. Argues from the unidentified anybody- 'Many say' 'Church websites say' 'I have heard...'
- h. Questions that obscure one's view and absolve of responsibility
- i. Working out his own personal angst p.20-23; 193-194. (Admits this in Bashir interview.)
- j. Uses words to control and manipulate, rather than to reveal and serve conversation.

Video: Martin Bashir Interview with Bell.

8. Conclusion: Challenges to Evangelicals

- A. 2 Cor. 4:1-2
- B. Real belief in Hell leads to compassion, love, humility and reverence
- C. Do we believe what we should believe; do we feel as we should feel?

Further Reading

D.A. Carson, 'On Banishing the Lake of Fire' in *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Zondervan, 1996.

Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment, Ed. Christopher W. Morgan, Robert A. Peterson, Zondervan, 2004.

Sovereign Grace 'The Rob Bell Debate: A reader's digest' - www.sovereigngraceministries.org

Easy Virtues & Cruel Mistresses: Bell's use of History, Carl Trueman,

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/easy-virtues-and-cruel-mistresses.php>

God Is Still Holy and What you learned In Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of Love Wins by Rob Bell, Kevin DeYoung, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>