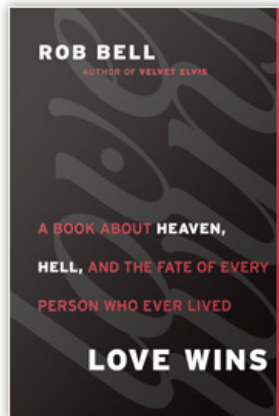


A Review of Love Wins by Rob Bell: By Pastor Chris Jordan



An Introduction: Why I've Written This Response:

After I graduated from *Pacific Life Bible College* in May of 1999, I had the privilege of serving in my alma mater as the adjunct professor of *Bible Research* and *Hermeneutics* (Bible Interpretation). For eight years, I shared with hundreds of men and women who were called by God to the ministry the principles of how to rightly interpret the Scriptures. One of the credos I shared with them was this statement, credited to Augustine: “*In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, Christian charity (love).*” This powerful statement is one that was adopted by my church’s denomination, the Foursquare Gospel Church, and I think that it is an important one. But what does it mean?

In order for us to have fellowship with one another as Christians, we must have *unity* in the basic, essential doctrines of the Christian faith. That means that in order to be considered an orthodox Christian church, we must agree on certain foundational truths – like the fact that the Bible is the Word of God, the tri-unity of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and the belief that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, once we have found unity in those essentials, we must have *liberty* in the non-essentials, and agree to disagree on minor doctrines that don’t affect our salvation. Some examples of this include the mode of baptism, whether or not a church believes that healing is for today, what type of instruments a church may use (or not use) in worship, and beliefs about eschatology (the end times).

Because of that foundational belief, I thoroughly enjoy reading Christian books from a radically diverse spectrum of denominational traditions and historical settings.

Some of my favourite historical authors (old dead dudes) include:

Charles Spurgeon	(a reformed Baptist pastor from England from the 1800’s)
Matthew Henry	(a British Presbyterian minister from the 1600’s)
C. S. Lewis	(a layman in the Church of England from the early 1900’s)
Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones	(a Welsh pastor who was Calvinistic and charismatic from the 1900’s)
Andrew Murray	(a South African pastor from the Dutch Reformed Church)
John Owen	(an English nonconformist church leader from the 1600’s)
Leonard Ravenhill	(a revivalist and evangelist from the 1900’s)
J. C. Ryle	(the first Anglican Bishop of Liverpool from the 1800’s)

My taste in contemporary Christian authors varies greatly as well, including:

Heidi Baker	(a Christian missionary and founder of Iris Ministries)
John Bevere	(a charismatic evangelist and Bible teacher)
Jack Hayford	(the fourth president of the Foursquare Church)
Howard Hendricks	(professor of Hermeneutics at Dallas Theological Seminary)
Bill Johnson	(an American Assemblies of God pastor)
Brennan Manning	(a catholic priest and friar)
John Piper	(a reformed Calvinistic pastor)
John Stott	(an Anglican clergyman)

I share that with you to lay the foundation that I believe in the importance of extending liberty to those who may have differing views on non-essential doctrines. I may not agree with Charles Spurgeon's stance on the cessation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but I love His teachings on the doctrines of grace. In other words, we don't write someone off or discount their teachings just because we don't believe in everything they have to say.

I heard a Bible teacher say once that listening to Bible teaching is like eating a chicken – you eat the meat and spit out the bones. That being said, it is a sad and unfortunate truth that many people are undiscerning in what they read (in books) or listen to (via podcasts, audio sermons, etc). Too many people will believe everything they hear or read, just because a certain pastor or Bible teacher said it or wrote it. However, God wants us to be like the Bereans. Acts 17:11 tells us that: "These (Bereans) were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." When we read a book or hear a sermon, we have a God-given responsibility to go back to the Bible and make sure what we're reading lines up with the Word of God. This brings me to the subject of this critical review – the new book *Love Wins* by mega-church pastor Rob Bell.

Over the past eighteen years that I have been involved in full time pastoral ministry, I have had several occasions to write critical responses to books that have had the potential to negatively affect the faith of those within the Christian community. From Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*, to the *Harry Potter* books and *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman, I have written numerous responses to the false ideas presented in these books. I am currently reading through and preparing to write a response to atheist Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion*. But when I first heard about Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*, and the fact that it might contain anti-Biblical teachings within it, I felt compelled to read the book and discover what was in it for myself, because of the fact that so many Christians read his writings. If this book actually contained the Universalist ideas that many bloggers were purporting that it did, then I felt it was important for me to add my voice to the dialogue, because here was deadly error that was about to be foisted upon the church from within the church itself.

As a final disclaimer before I begin the actual review of this book, I want to make it clear that this is not a personal attack against Rob Bell, or against the *Emergent Church* movement of which he is apart of. Rather, it is a Biblical response to the teachings that Bell has presented in his book *Love Wins*. You don't need to take my word for what I am saying; in fact, I encourage you to go back to the Bible for yourself, and see if what I'm saying is true. My prayer for you as you read through this response is "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened." (Ephesians 1:17-18a).

The Preface: A New Look at Christianity:

In the introduction to his book, Rob Bell says, "*Some communities don't permit open, honest inquiry about the things that matter most. Lots of people have voiced a concern, expressed a doubt, or raised a question, only to be told by their family, church, friends or tribe: "We don't discuss those things here."* (ix). From the beginning, I want to make it clear that I am not a part of that group of people who are opposed to questions, concerns or doubts. I encourage discussion

and dialogue, but when it comes to what we believe about God, heaven, and hell, I believe that the ultimate authority for our discussion must be the eternal Word of God – the Bible.

Rob Bell makes this bold assertion early on in his book:

“A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Christ. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.” (viii).

Ironically, it was Jesus Himself who said, “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:14). Jesus also said, “Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” (Luke 12:5). I may not personally like the doctrine of hell, but Jesus Himself said that God will send to hell those who choose to reject His free offer of salvation and eternal life. So, what Bell is essentially saying here is that the teachings of Jesus Christ, the son of God, are misguided and toxic. Wow.

For two thousand years, the orthodox Christian church has universally and unanimously held to the belief in the reality of Heaven and hell, as seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.”¹

Kevin deYoung responds to Bell’s statement that many Christians don’t believe in hell:

“This bold claim flies in the face of Richard Bauckham’s historical survey: Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. . . . Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of the universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation.”²

Perhaps one of the most frustrating things in Bell’s book was his lack of documentation for many of the outrageous claims that he makes. For example, he writes: “...*nothing in this book hasn’t been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me. I haven’t come up with a radical new teaching that’s any kind of departure from what’s been said an untold number of times. That’s the beauty of the orthodox Christian faith.*” (x). If that’s true, that there are untold numbers of people who have taught the things that Bell teaches, then why doesn’t he mention their names? Could it be that the numbers are not quite as exaggerated as he would lead us to believe?

Bell writes, “*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?*” (2). The answer of course is yes. First and foremost, God *is* a loving God – God is love.

And yet, He is also holy and just, and as a holy and just God, must punish sin. Romans 11:22 tells us to: “consider the goodness *and* severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” It is erroneous to focus only on the love and goodness of God, and to neglect His holiness and justice. I wonder if the following passage, written by the Apostle Paul, wouldn’t be a fitting response to Bell’s dangerous charges against God’s character.

“What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:14-24).

Chapter One: Questions, Questions!

In this chapter, Bell attacks the notion of people needing a personal relationship with God to keep from spending eternity in torment in hell. He says, “*The problem, however, is that the phrase, “personal relationship” is found nowhere in the Bible.*” (10). That statement is as ridiculous as saying, “The word “trinity” is found nowhere in the Bible.” Although it may be true that the word “trinity” is not found in the Bible, the doctrine of the tri-unity of the Godhead permeates the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. In the same way, the whole story of the Bible is about God initiating and pursuing a personal loving relationship with human beings! From the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden who, when then they sinned, were sought out by God, who said, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) to the book of Revelation where Jesus writes a letter to a church and says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (3:20).

It is bad enough that Bell attacks the foundational belief that Christianity is about a personal relationship with God, but later on in the book he seems to be ambivalent because he turns around and says, “*When people say that Jesus came to die on the cross so that we can have a relationship with God, yes, that is true.*” (134) and “*God is love, and love is a relationship.*” (178). So which is it, Rob? Is Christianity about a personal relationship with God, or not? Having these two contradictory statements is confusing at best; misleading at worst. This seems to be the general format of the ‘teaching’ in this book: rather than presenting the truths of the Scripture, Bell is content to just ask questions, and leave the reader walking away confused, with more doubts and questions than answers. On page 13 he asks question after question: “*So is it what you say that saves you? So is it about being born again or being considered worthy? Is it what you say or what you are that saves you?*” He brings up all sorts of different Scriptures that on the

surface may seem to contradict one another, but rather than showing how the Scriptures actually are cohesive and unified, he gives the impression that the Bible is confusing and contradictory. It's okay to ask questions, but what about giving some answers? Sadly, this question-asking has become almost a virtue to those who belong to the Emergent Church movement, as blogger and author Tim Challies aptly noted in a recent blog post:

“Asking questions is in; answering them in a clear and compelling way is out. Here is how Greg Boyd praises Bell in this regard: “Rob is first and foremost a poet/artist/dramatist who has a fantastic gift for communicating in ways that inspire creativity and provoke thought. Rob is far more comfortable (and far better at) questioning established beliefs and creatively hinting at possible answers than he is at constructing a logically rigorous case defending a definitive conclusion.” As just one example, the strength of the Emerging Church and its draw was far more in asking questions than in answering them. In fact, the New Calvinism and the Emerging Church arose by asking many of the same questions—questions that came out of the Church Growth Movement and the slow erosion of significant, weighty doctrine. Right teaching and right living were being replaced by mindless entertainment and those who became Emergent leaders asked many good questions. But their answers, when they were willing to give them, were lousy. One might say that asking questions without the ability or willingness to answer them is dangerous, misleading, even irresponsible. Jesus loved to ask tough questions, undermining false faith. But he would always return with truth to shore up the cracked foundations. Many leaders today feel little need to do this. They are content to undermine, to cause doubt, without responding with clear truth. There is no virtue in this.”³

Chapter Two: A Look at Heaven?

In this chapter, Bell begins to expound his unique theory about what heaven is like, with a very decided emphasis on the here and now, rather than the eternal aspects of this doctrine. In defining Heaven, Bell says: *“Heaven... is simply another way of saying “God.” ... (it) is a real place, space and dimension of God’s creation, where God’s will and only God’s will is done.”* (42). There are no Scripture references to back up his definition of what heaven will be like, which is surprising and unfortunate when there are at least four chapters in the book of Revelation alone (4-5 & 21-22) that give us a description of heaven. It was very challenging reading through chapter two and trying to come to a conclusion about what Bell believes about what heaven is like. Is it an actual place we go to when we die? Or is it just a state of being that we experience when we do nice things for people? Fortunately, we don't have to wade our way through Bell's muddled and obtuse musings about heaven – we can go to the Bible for ourselves.

For a book that claims in its byline to be “A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived” there is surprisingly little Biblical description of what heaven is actually like! He talks a lot about what heaven *isn't*, including pop-cultural concepts of harps and clouds and streets of gold, where everybody is dressed in white robes (24). But he never digs into what the Bible has to say about what Heaven *will* be like, a place where “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:4). Bell seems to take issue with the fact that much of the *“talk about heaven (is) framed in terms of who ‘gets in’ or how to ‘get in’.”*

(50). I would think that this would be one of the most important truths that someone could share in a book about heaven! What difference does it make if Heaven is the most amazing, wonderful paradise of all, if we don't know how to get there?

In this chapter, Bell makes the following statement: *“Much of the speculation about heaven – and, more important, the confusion – comes from the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who ‘know’ everything.”* (51). This is perplexing because this belief which he seems to be discounting is actually a solid Biblical concept: “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:52, *emphasis mine*).

Chapter Three: Bell's Hell:

Perhaps one of the most troubling sections in the whole book is the chapter on Bell's understanding of hell – this being the main thrust of *Love Wins*. Although Bell says, *“Do I believe in a literal hell? Of course.”* (71), it is important to understand what the author means by the hell he says he believes in. Bell's hell is not the same as the Bible's definition of hell. Bell's hell is rape, abuse, suicide, addiction and the pain felt in relationships that comes from those terrible things (71). Hell – to Rob Bell – is not how the Bible defines it, a place of everlasting torment for those who reject Christ. In fact, he mocks the Bible idea of hell by calling it “a holdover from primitive, mythic religion.” Whether Rob Bell likes it or not, the Bible description of the afterlife clearly delineates eternal rewards for the righteous, and eternal punishments for the unrepentant. Jesus Christ Himself says, “And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46). Jesus also teaches that on the Day of Judgment, He will say to those who did not know Him as Lord and Saviour, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41). It seems pretty clear here that Jesus is saying that the punishment of hellfire will be everlasting or eternal. But Bell contradicts this teaching of Jesus by saying, *“So when we read ‘eternal punishment’... Jesus isn't talking about forever as we think of forever.”* (93). So who are you going to believe – Rob Bell, or Jesus?

One of the tactics Bell employs to try to twist what the Bible means by everlasting punishment is a redefining of Bible terms. He says that *“the goats (unbelievers) are sent, in the Greek language, to an aion of kolazo. Aion, we know, has several meanings. One is “age” or period of time”; another refers to intensity of experience.”* (91). That last phrase was an interesting thought, so I got out my Greek dictionary and decided to do a word study on *everlasting* as found in Matthew 25:46. The first thing that caught my eye was the fact that Bell did not refer to the correct Greek word, which in this passage is *aiónios*. Whether he was intentionally misleading or merely copied down the wrong word, I am not sure. (Although the etymology of *aiónios* does contain the word *aion*, that is not the word used in this passage here). So what does *aiónios* (the Greek word we translate into everlasting or eternal) actually mean then? Bell says one of its meanings is an intensity of experience, but I am very curious to know where he got that definition from. In the New Testament Greek Lexicon, this word is defined thus: *“without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be; without beginning; without end, never to cease, everlasting.”*⁴ Not one of those possible definitions even vaguely refers to Bell's notion that everlasting simply refers to an intensity of experience! (Even if you were to look at the Greek word *aion* that Bell incorrectly referred to, this word's definition is: *for ever*,

an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity’). Where did Bell come up with the idea that hell’s punishment is not eternal, but rather simply refers to an intense pruning experience?

In Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Vine (who is one of the world’s foremost Greek scholars) refutes Bell’s misinterpretation of the word eternal:

“The predominant meaning of *aionios*, that in which it is used everywhere in the NT... may be seen in 2 Cor. 4:18, where it is set in contrast with *proskairos*, lit., “for a season”... Moreover it is used of persons and things which are in their nature endless... (in other words, it is never used for a limited or set period of time)... *Aionios* is also used of the sin that ‘hath never forgiveness’ (Mark 3:29), and of the judgment of God, from which there is no appeal (Heb. 6:2), and of the fire, which is one of its instruments (Matt. 18:8) and which is elsewhere said to be ‘unquenchable,’ (Mark 9:43). The use of *aionios* here shows that the punishment referred to in 2 Thess. 1:9 (Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power) is not temporary, but final, and accordingly, the phraseology shows that its purpose is not remedial (as Bell tries to make it out to be) but retributive.”⁵

Chapter Four: Universalism Revealed:

In this chapter, Bell sets out to make his case for his Universalist doctrine that says everyone will be saved and go to heaven. His chapter title is a misleading “Does God Get What God Wants?” His premise is as follows: “*I point out these parallel claims: that God is mighty, powerful, and “in control” and that billions of people will spend forever apart from God, who is their creator, even though it’s written in the Bible that “God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2). 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.*” (97). If that wasn’t bold or blasphemous enough, he goes on to say, “*Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God fail in the end?*” (98).

What is Bell saying here? He seems to be saying that because God’s desire is that all men would be saved, then if all are not saved, then (a) God is not great, and (b) God is a failure. (Incidentally, *god is not Great* is the title to a book by atheist Christopher Hitchens who hates Christianity and the church). Wow. So if the Bible record is true (and I hold that it is), that God does desire all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), but not all people will be saved (Matthew 7:13; 7:21-23; 25:1-13 and 25:31-46 are four Scriptures that bear this out), then according to Bell, God is not great, and He is a failure. That’s a dangerous claim to make! And not only that, but it shows that the author lacks a basic understanding of the two different aspects of the will of God – the *decretive* will of God (that which He decrees and will absolutely be fulfilled) and the *general* will of God (that which He desires people to do, but they have the freedom to obey or reject that part of His will).

We see a description of the *decretive* will of God in Ephesians 1:11: “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” But we also see many examples of the *general* will of God

which doesn't always come to pass, like in Matthew 7:21 where Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." The two implications Jesus makes here are (1) that not everyone will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (contrary to Bell's universalistic doctrine) and (2) that not everyone will do the will of the Father. Can God's *general* will be rejected? Luke seemed to think so when he wrote, "But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves." (Luke 7:30). Another example is where the Apostle Paul wrote, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality." (1 Thess. 4:3). God's will is for His people to walk in holiness and purity, and yet not all believers do. Therefore, we see that it is vitally important to understand the difference between the decretive and general will of God.

An even more troubling and disturbing concept Bell brings forth in chapter four is the idea that people can get saved even after they die! He quotes a letter from Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, who wrote "*about the possibility that people could turn to God after death, asking, 'Who would doubt God's ability to do that?' ... And then there are others who ask, if you get another chance after you die, why limit that chance to a one-off immediately after death? And so they expand the possibilities, trusting that there will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God.*" (106). Unfortunately, Bell is guilty of taking out of context Martin Luther's comment in this letter, as Carl R Trueman (the Departmental Chair of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary) makes clear:

"In this letter, Luther is answering the question, raised by von Rechenberg, as to whether any can be saved without faith. Luther's answer is a clear 'no.' In fact, the letter is specifically aimed at refuting any notion that anyone can be saved by anything other than faith as Luther defines it... Any medieval theologian worth his salt knows that the key to understanding how things actually are, how God actually works in relation to the created world, is his ordained power, those things which he has actually determined to do. What Luther is focusing on here is not the possibility of postmortem evangelism but the absolute necessity of faith in the ordained order. Indeed, he goes out of his way to say that we have no basis for thinking that postmortem evangelism does occur, only that God could have established it that way had he so wished. Bell's mistake is that he draws a patently wrong conclusion about Luther's argument here because he either did not allow the wider context of the quotation to inform his understanding of its meaning or did not understand the medieval theology and rhetorical argumentation underlying Luther's point."⁶

However, even if Martin Luther – or any other Bible teacher or preacher for that matter – makes a statement, it doesn't automatically make it true! When we go back to the Scriptures, we will find no such teaching that says that after a person dies, they have a second chance to believe in Jesus and be saved. Hebrews 9:27 says, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Bell's updated and modified idea of purgatory that says people can have a second chance after they die has no basis in the Bible.

Although Bell has denied numerous times that he is a Universalist, he clearly teaches: "*At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart,*

and even the most “depraved sinners” will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.” (107). A Universalist is defined in the World English Dictionary as: “a system of religious beliefs maintaining that all men are predestined for salvation.” As Tim Challies notes, “(Rob Bell) would deny the (Universalist) label as he tends to deny any label. But if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, well, you know how it goes.”⁷

In this chapter, we see another example of Bell making bold faced claims about support for his Universalist beliefs, without any documentation supporting the claim: “*And so, beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will ultimately restore everything and everybody...*” (107). On the following page, he writes, “*To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God’s pursuit forever, because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.*” (108). Once again, my challenge to Bell is – can you share with us who these Christians are? I have read literally thousands of books by Christian authors of varied denominational backgrounds from the first century right through to the 21st Century, and to date, Rob Bell is the first ‘Christian’ author I have read who claims to believe in this Universalist heresy. Who are the others? I have read the writings of the early church fathers including Augustine; I have read the great reformers of the 1500’s including Martin Luther and John Calvin; I have read the puritans, Baptists and Pentecostals, charismatics and cessationists, Protestants and Catholics, Calvinists and Ariminians, and not one mention of the idea of Universalism. Until now. Until Bell. One of the things I taught my Hermeneutics students when I was a professor at PLBC was this: Unique interpretations are usually wrong! When Bell comes along and puts forth a doctrine that the historic, orthodox Christian church has not believed for two thousand years, then this is a good indication that it isn’t true!

Denny Burk, the Associate Professor of New Testament and Dean of Boyce College, the undergraduate arm of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, agrees:

“Bell presses the boundary issue in this book. Even though he does not want to be labeled a Universalist, he clearly wants universalism to be seen as a legitimate, orthodox option for Christians (p. 109-110). Yet universalism is anything but orthodox. It was condemned as a heresy at the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553), and Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants all eschew the idea that ultimately hell will be empty with all people eventually inheriting eternal life. Bells attempt to enlist Martin Luther, Augustine, and others in his apology for universalism is a real howler. To say that universalism is in the orthodox mainstream is simply an historical error.”⁸

Rob Bell does little to hide his distaste for the Christian message of the Bible when he writes: “*...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.*” (110). I had always thought it was the job of pastors, preachers and teachers of God’s Word to *tell* others the story of the Bible and not *criticize* it or call it a bad story. I’ll admit that there are certain doctrines in the Bible that I personally don’t

like, but it is God's Word, and not my own. I don't get to choose the message I preach. It is my responsibility to be faithful to the Word of God, even if it says something I don't like.

Why did Rob Bell write *Love Wins*?

Up until this point, a lot of my critical response to Bell's book has been to respond with the truth from God's Word. However, I would like to take a step back and do a little speculating here as to why I think that Rob Bell may have written this book. There are many atheists in the world today who have written books bashing the Christian faith, and especially attacking the Bible teaching concerning the holiness and wrath of God. From Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* to Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*, there seems to be an all-out attack on the character of God. In *Delusion*, Dawkins bashes the idea of the justice of God when he writes, "*The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak...*"⁹ He goes on and on after this, but I don't have the stomach to continue quoting his poisonous rant. It seems to me – and this is only my opinion here – that Bell has been overwhelmed by the criticism leveled against Christianity by these outspoken atheists, and rather than deal Biblically with the issues they bring up, he instead is reinventing a Christianity that is more palatable to the modern mind. But I digress...

Chapter Five: A Pastor's Trip to an Eminem Concert?

At the beginning of this chapter, Bell tells the story about a time when he attended an Eminem concert, and I have been scratching my head ever since trying to figure out why he included it in his book. Eminem's songs are "utterly overwhelmed by the flood of corrupt foulness... rapes, assaults and murder provide subject matter for 12 of 20 tracks (on his latest CD). Listeners are assaulted by repeated, sadistic and explicit references to rape... as well as incest, sodomy, oral sex, masturbation, a failed suicide attempt"¹⁰ and even more gross sins that I won't repeat here! I wonder if Bell's inclusion of this story was to shock and offend Christians, or to appeal to the secular crowd who might be reading his book to say, "Hey, I'm just like you!" But again, this is another digression from the main point of this review... back to the book!

Chapter Six: More Bad Hermeneutics:

In this chapter, Bell continues his Scripture twisting as he now turns his guns towards the person of Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection. He says, "*Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain and name him, especially the one called 'Christianity'.*" (150).

Is that true? In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." In the Book of Acts, we have a record of the birth of the church of Jesus Christ, and we learn that "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (Acts 11:26). I think it's unfair to call the Christian Church (which Jesus founded Himself) a cage or a label, when both of those words are Biblical terms Jesus and the Holy Spirit used to refer to the Way that Jesus initiated. Why would Jesus want to transcend the Church "which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23)? That doesn't even make sense.

As Bell progresses in this chapter, his poor hermeneutics gets even worse when he comes to one of the most important Scriptures in the Bible – John 14:6 – where Jesus declares: "I am the way,

the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Bell writes: “*This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make. What he (Jesus) doesn’t say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through Him. He doesn’t even state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him.*” (154). Really?

Kevin DeYoung notes: “Even a cursory glance at John 14 shows that the *through* in verse 16 refers to *faith*. The chapter begins by saying, “Believe in God; believe also in me.” Verse seven talks about knowing the Father. Verses nine and ten explain that we see and know the Father by believing that Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him. Verses 11 and 12 touch on belief yet again. Coming to the Father through Christ means through faith in Christ. This is in keeping with the overall purpose of John’s gospel (John 20:31).”¹¹

Although this Scripture more than any other in the Bible clearly makes the claims of Christ and the way to Heaven exclusive, Bell tries to redefine this passage by saying that Jesus is really talking about “*an exclusivity on the other side on inclusivity.*” (154). What does that mean? “*This kind insists that Jesus is the way, but holds tightly to the assumption that the all-embracing love of this particular Jesus the Christ will of course include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum.*” (155). Now, if Bell is merely saying that Jesus will save people from all kinds of cultures, races and social classes, then of course I accept that – Jesus will save all who call upon His name. But if Bell is saying that all people will be saved whether or not they confess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, then I have to take issue with that.

The author goes on to say, “*As soon as the door is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying that then Jesus doesn’t matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn’t matter what you believe, and so forth. Not true.*” (155). Well, with the exception of the comment about Baptists from Cleveland (?), I would have to disagree with Bell here. If, as Bell in his favourite ambiguous fashion seems to be saying here, all people are going to be saved regardless of what they do with Jesus, then how does Jesus matter, and what relevance does the Cross have?

Do all roads lead to Heaven? The Bible’s answer to that, after two thousand years, continues to be a resounding NO. Because the Bible teaches that all have sinned (Romans 3:23) and the wages or penalty for sin is death (Romans 6:23a), then the only salvation is through believing in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the free gift of God (Romans 6:23b). And how do we receive this gift? Notice the conditional statement the Bible makes here: “That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus (*there’s that Name*) and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, (then) you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9). Bell’s claim that “*Sometimes people use his name; other times they don’t*” (pg. 158) doesn’t line up with what the Bible says. Salvation is only in the name of Jesus: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:9-11).

Bell says, "...it is our responsibility to be extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people's destinies. As Jesus says, he 'did not come to judge the world, but to save the world' (John 12)." (160). It's interesting that the author doesn't give the specific verse reference to this quote, and I wonder if it isn't because he was afraid his readers might look up this verse (John 12:47), and discover the context of this statement, for Jesus' very next words are: "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him--the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (v. 48). Talk about taking Scripture out of context! It's true that people don't need to make judgments about other people's destinies, but the Bible itself already has made those declarations! In this same book of the Bible that Bell quotes from, Jesus also says: "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." (John 3:18), and "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 3:36). I'm curious to know what Rob Bell does with these and the other multitudinous Scriptures that refer to the dividing line between the eternal rewards of believers, and eternal punishments of unbelievers.

Chapter Seven: God is Vicious and Devastating?

In the next chapter, Bell goes on to define a little more what he means when he talks about hell. Hell, he writes, "is our refusal to trust God's retelling of our story." Huh? The Bible says, "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God." (Psalm 9:17). God says that hell is for the wicked, and Bell says that hell is for those who don't trust God to 'retell our story'? This is just getting weirder and weirder!

Later on in this chapter, Bell goes on once again to defame the nature and character of our God when he writes:

"Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way according to the person telling them the gospel, and they were 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 insure that they would have 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. Loving one moment, vicious the next. That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can." (173-174).

This terrible caricature of God reminds me so much of the one that Dawkins wrote about in *Delusion*, that it makes me wonder if Bell wasn't influenced by this atheist's writings. Obviously we don't believe that God is loving one moment and vicious the next. (We don't believe God is vicious at all!). But we do believe that the same God who is *love* is also equally and fully *holy*

and *just*. This is why the Apostle Paul tells us to: “Notice how God is both kind *and* severe. He is severe to those who disobeyed, but kind to you as you continue to trust in his kindness...” (Romans 11:22, NLT). Although God is loving and kind to His children, and has promised to protect and provide for them, He has made no such promise for the wicked and unbelieving people who reject His free offer of grace, peace and salvation. It would not be just of God to allow the guilty to go free and unpunished! The holiness and justice of God demands that there be punishment for sin and rebellion.

In Conclusion:

Some might wonder why I have gone to such great lengths to point out all of the errors in this book, *Love Wins*, especially after making the point that I enjoy reading a wide variety of authors from different denominations and traditions within the Christian faith. In this book, Rob Bell declares that ultimately, all people will be saved, regardless of what they do with the person of Jesus Christ. The danger here is that if people believe this error, and choose to reject Jesus because they have the false hope of getting to Heaven anyway, then it could result in literally hundreds if not thousands of people going to hell because they believed this lie. Eternal lives are hanging in the balance here!

Michael Foust, a writer for the Baptist Press News, also believes that the theology in *Love Wins* must be challenged:

“A panel of Christian leaders said March 17 that Rob Bell's popularity among evangelicals -- particularly among younger ones -- makes it critical for the church to respond with biblical clarity to his new book. Bell, the panelists said, has redefined the Gospel and his beliefs clearly fall outside historical biblical orthodoxy. In *Love Wins*, Bell denies a literal hell and affirms a form of universalism. "We wouldn't be having this panel discussion if John Shelby Spong wrote another book," R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said. Spong, 79, is a former Episcopal bishop and a well-known liberal scholar who has denied virtually every major Christian doctrine. "... Rob Bell is a different story. He has a tremendous influence, especially with younger evangelicals, and I think that's why we have to talk about this. We're very concerned about the loss of the Gospel.”¹²

Rob Bell began his book by saying, “*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.*” (vii). Although I agree that the story of Jesus is about God’s love, I would amend his last statement to read, more Biblically, “It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere *who will repent of their sins, and put their faith in Jesus Christ.*” THIS is the Good News of the Bible.

Our justification, peace with God, and salvation from His wrath comes only through the person of Jesus Christ and His blood that He shed when He died on the Cross for us. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” (Romans 8:1,8-9). My hope is built on nothing less – and nothing more – than this.

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less:

(lyrics by: Edward Mote)

My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteous;
No merit of my own I claim But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.

When he shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in him be found,
Clothed in his righteousness alone, Redeemed to stand before the throne!
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.

If you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, won't you come to Him today?
"For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:14).

Pastor Chris Jordan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chris grew up in a little house on the Canadian prairies in Rouleau, Saskatchewan. Although he first became a Christian in August of 1989, it wasn't until September of 1990 that he radically committed his life to Jesus Christ. For the next year, Chris attended *Solid Rock Ministries* in Regina, a powerful little church pastored by Erwin Dyck and Dave Koop. In January of 1992, Chris attended *Christ for the Nations Bible College* in Surrey, BC. After only a year and a half of Bible College, he started interning at *Victory Christian Centre*, where he served as the youth pastor for four years. Two of those years were also spent as a prayer minister working for *KCM Ministries*. In March of 1995, Chris married his best friend, Liza Woods.

In January of 1997, Chris enrolled in *Pacific Life Bible College* (PLBC), and came on staff at Bible Fellowship Church. For the next ten years, he served that local church as youth pastor and Christian Education Director. During those ten years, Chris was the chapel speaker for the primary students at *Regent Christian Academy* (RCA). He also taught several Bible classes at RCA, and filled in as a substitute teacher for many other subjects as well. In May of 1999, Chris graduated from PLBC with a Bachelor of Arts in Pastoral Leadership. After graduation, Chris taught Bible Research and Hermeneutics as an adjunct professor at Pacific Life for the next eight years. In September of 2006, Chris and Liza pioneered the *Revolution Master's Commission* (RMC) discipleship program at Bible Fellowship.

Two months later, Chris received the call from the Lord to pastor *Beausejour Community Church*. Because he had just started the RMC program at Bible Fellowship, he felt he needed to complete the first year of this discipleship school before moving to Beausejour. So in January of 2007, Chris was installed as the lead pastor of BCC and started travelling back and forth between BC and Manitoba. In July of 2007, Chris and Liza moved to Beausejour with their four children: Caleb, Tori, Austin & Hannah. He currently continues to serve as the lead pastor of BCC. In June of 2010, Pastor Chris published his first book, "Supernatural: Contending for Signs and Wonders Today."

Pastor Chris has a passion to teach and preach God's Word, and is contending for signs and wonders to be restored to the church in an ever-increasing manner.

END NOTES:

¹ **The Westminster Confession of Faith**, The Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/

² Kevin deYoung, **God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of “Love Wins”** <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>.

³ Tim Challies, **The New Evangelical Virtues**, <http://www.challies.com/articles/the-new-evangelical-virtues>

⁴ **The New Testament Greek Lexicon**, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/aionios.html>.

⁵ W. E. Vine, **Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words**, pg. 209.

⁶ Carl Trueman, **Easy Virtues and Cruel Mistresses**, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/easy-virtues-and-cruel-mistresses.php>

⁷ Tim Challies, *ibid.*

⁸ Denny Burk, **Revising Hell into the Heterodox Mainstream**, <http://www.dennyburk.com/revising-hell-into-the-heterodox-mainstream/>

⁹ Richard Dawkins, **The God Delusion**, pg. 51.

¹⁰ **Focus on the Family’s Plugged in Online** album review of Eminem’s *Relapse*, <http://www.pluggedin.ca/music/albums/2009/eminem-relapse.aspx>.

¹¹ Kevin deYoung, *ibid.*

¹² Michael Foust, **Rob Bell's popularity makes clear biblical response critical, evangelical panel says**, <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/BPnews.asp?ID=34868>.