

Book Review of *Love Wins*
Reviewed by Gregory C. Christopher, Ph.D.
Vice President of Academic Affairs

Love Wins: A Book about Heave, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived. By Rob Bell. New York: HarperOne, 2011, 202 pp., \$22.99.

A firestorm of controversy and debate began even before the book was released on March 15, 2011. The debate spread across the Evangelical world because of an eye-catching promotional video posted on YouTube.¹

As I publically evaluate the book, *Love Wins*, I do understand that my work may be understood as the work of pride and one without love. The book itself projects the central attribute of God as that of love. I am keenly aware of the risk I take. One may interpret this book review as arrogant, old-fashioned, hard-lined, and uncaring conservatism. The claim may be that in the face of God's love I show anything but love.

I am especially keen about the risk I take because of the larger culture in which we live and do ministry. We live in a world that demands tolerance. The assumption is that we do not know everything and certainly should not assume that one is right and one is wrong. We must learn to love those with whom we disagree and acknowledge their contribution as to how we understand the world in which we all live.²

¹ www.annarbor.com/faith-rob-bells-new-book-love-wins-unleashes-backlash/

² The Barna Group released results of a survey concerning what Americans believe about universalism and pluralism (April 18, 2011). The results are significant. For example, 43% of Americans agreed and 54% disagreed with the statement, "It doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons." Similar results emerged for the statements, "All people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their religious belief" (40% agreed, 55% disagreed) and the statement, "All people are eventually saved or accepted by God, no matter what they do, because he loves all people he has created (40% versus 50%). (www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/484-what-americans-believe-about-universalism-and-pluralism).

The issue is acute for young believers. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group writes: "This gap [between younger born again Christians and their parents' generation] represents increasing pressure on young believers to understand those differences and to find meaning and confidence in their faith convictions. This may be part of the reason young people are hesitant to share their faith with others and why they have so many questions about the nature of heaven: they are less certain what they believe and crossing the divide to

The Bible presents a very different understanding of the role of Christ-like leadership. Ephesians 4:11-16 defines the expectation of the pastor-teacher and the evangelist. In distinction to those who deceive, Christ-like leaders are to speak the truth with love. When truth is taught, the congregation matures and is not tossed about with every wind of doctrine. To “love” without truth is not biblical love. It is in this in this context that I review *Love Wins*.

SUMMARY OF LOVE WINS

Bell rocked the conservative world of theology and the world of ministry with the publication of *Love Wins*. He does so by questioning two basic platforms of the gospel. First, he redefines traditional theology or at least places great emphasis on the love of God as opposed to the holiness or righteousness of God. He writes,

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? (p.2)

Second, he redefines the nature of hell. He rejects what conservatives understand to be the definition of hell as the eternal place of eternal punishment. He redefines hell as an “intense experience of correction” (p. 91). Though my review focuses on Bell’s definition of hell, it is not possible to separate his understanding of God’s nature and his view of the eternal destiny of unbelievers.

EVALUATION OF LOVE WINS

I review Bell in three steps. First, I demonstrate that the basis for Bell’s position is a highly unacceptable use of God’s word. He selectively chooses verses and either removes them from the context or actually grossly manipulates the verses to fit his purpose. Second, there are passages of

communicate with their peers on this issue is a big jump. Helping to prepare young people for this belief gap and enabling them to understand biblical teaching—while also encouraging healthy friendships with people who hold other spiritual views—are crucial challenges for today’s Christian leaders” (www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/484-what-americans-believe-about-universalism-and-pluralism).

Scripture that speak to the nature of eternal hell which Bell ignores. One's response to Jesus in this life does have eternal consequences for the unbeliever. Third, I show the relationship between the nature of God's righteousness and the need to accept the gospel message. Paul's claim is that mercy wins.³

BELL'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

The basis for Bell's position is a highly unacceptable use of God's word. He selectively chooses verses and either removes them from the context or actually grossly manipulates the verses to fit his purpose. His conclusion is that hell is an "intense experience of correction" (p.91) and not everlasting punishment.

The key passage of chapter 3: "Hell" is Matthew 25:46.⁴ The context is the judgment of sheep and goats which will occur following the seven-year period of tribulation at which time Jesus Christ

³ It is important to clarify terms. It is common to refer to the eternal destiny of the unbeliever as hell. However, Revelation 20:14 speaks of the lake of fire as that eternal abode for unbelievers. Bell uses the term *hell* in the more popular sense.

⁴ Bell refers to a number of OT passages suggesting God's intent is not for unbelievers to experience eternal punishment. Rather one is to understand that "there is movement from judgment to restoration, from punishment to new life" (p. 85). This provides the groundwork for his argument in chapter 4: "Does God Get What God Wants?"

In chapter 3, for example, Bell refers to Ezekiel 16 and Jeremiah 32. He writes, "No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever" (p. 86). The implication here is that unbelievers will have opportunity to be restored to God in the afterlife. However, his interpretation of these OT passages cannot be accepted. The focus here is Jeremiah 32.

Jeremiah as do other OT prophets, prophecies of impending judgment. The basis for that judgment is laid out in 32:23-35. There is also the promise of restoration. Jeremiah is clear, however, that the restoration is based upon God's eternal covenant, a clear reference to the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (J. Andrew DeArman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002] 297-98). Jeremiah uses the covenant formula in 32:38 (cf. 24:7; 30:22; 31:1). God pledges to protect His people and they in turn promise to be loyal and obedient (NET Bible). The basis for that loyalty and obedience is the New Covenant. In the future God will no longer relate to the nation by means of the Mosaic Law but will relate to the nation as those whose sins are forgiven. Paul refers to this event in Romans 11: 26-28. At the time of Jesus second coming, the whole nation will be born again. Set in context, Bell must manipulate the prophecy to understand Jeremiah suggesting that unbelievers have a second chance to be restored to God in the future. That is completely foreign to Jeremiah's prophecy.

returns to earth to establish His earthly kingdom.⁵ The key phrase for Bell is *eis kolasin aiōnion* (“into eternal punishment”). Because of the importance of his interpretation, I quote his argument here. He writes:

The goats 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. The word *kolazo* is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish.

An *aion* of *kolazo*. [sic] Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean “a period of pruning” or “a time of trimming,” or an intense experience of correction” (p.91).

I offer three responses to Bell’s interpretation of the phrase *kolasin aiōnion* as “an intense experience of correction.” First, Bell has proposed an interpretation of the key phrase that is counter to biblical scholarship. There is no lexical evidence for his interpretation. The noun *kolasin* in the NT means *transcendent retribution* and must be translated as “punishment.”⁶ Bell argues that the term *aion* has several meanings. However, he claims that *aiōnion* cannot mean “eternal” or “forever” because such an interpretation “is not really a category the biblical writers used” (p. 92). There is no basis for such a conclusion. NT scholars agree that *aion* does “pertain to a period of unending duration,” and should be translated “without end.”⁷

Second, the parallel phrase, *hoi de dikaioi eis zōēn aiōnion* (“and the righteous into eternal life”) shows Bell’s interpretation is untenable. Bell does not deny that believers have eternal life, but does deny unbelievers will suffer eternal punishment even though Jesus uses the same adjective *aiōnion* to

⁵ The assumption here is a traditional dispensational position. The point of the evaluation however is not contingent on this theology.

⁶ BDAG, p. 555. The verb, *kolazo* means to penalize, punish (e.g., Acts 4:21; 2 Peter 2:9) (*EDNT*, vol 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 544, 555). Louw and Nida explain the term has the implication of punishment resulting in severe suffering (*Semantic Domains*, 38.2).

⁷ BDAG, p. 33. *EDNT*, vol 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 44-45. Louw and Nida define the term as pertaining to an unlimited duration of time (*Semantic Domains*, 67.96).

define both eternal states. If *eis zōēn aiōnion* means “into eternal life,” then *eis kolasin aiōnion* must mean “into eternal punishment.”⁸

Third, Bell fails to note the parallel passage in Matthew 25:41. Jesus defines the goats or unbelievers as those who are cursed. Their destiny is the eternal (aiōnion) lake of fire, a place originally prepared for Satan and his angels.⁹ There is no opportunity for future reconciliation.

The claim of chapter 4: “Does God Get What God Wants?” builds on chapter 3. Bell argued that hell is not eternal punishment but leads to restoration. In chapter 4 he connects God’s love to His plan to reconcile of all things. Bell writes, “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” (p. 107).¹⁰ The basis for his claim includes Matthew 19:28, Acts 3:19-21 and Colossians 1:20. I focus here on Colossians 1.¹¹

Bell claims without comment concerning Colossians 1:20 that *all things* will be reconciled to God. For him, this must include all unbelievers though in this life they did not believe. Such unbelievers will be in a position in the next life where God’s love will “melt their heart” and they will “eventually give up their resistance and turn to God” (p. 107).

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *WBC*, vol. 33b: *Matthew*. (Waco: Word Bible Commentary, 1995) 745. Michael J. Wilkins. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 812.

⁹ R. T. France argues that Jesus’ reference to fire refers to a fire that destroys the unbeliever. (*The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 966-97). The position is referred to as conditional immortality. For an evaluation of this position, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), pp. 1148-1153.

¹⁰ Bell makes a similar claim later in the chapter. The goal is to demonstrate that his view is not new in the church. He writes, “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).

¹¹ A similar critique can be made of Bell’s interpretation of Matthew 19:28 and acts 3:19-21. The contexts both anticipate the time when Jesus establishes His earthly kingdom. There is nothing in the context to justify Bell’s understanding that love wins.

Such an interpretation is flawed. I make three points. First, if “all things” in 1:20 refer to the possible reconciliation all human beings, should this not also include the reconciliation of Satan and his angels? I am not aware of anyone who argues that Satan and his angels will be reconciled to God. However, given Bell’s interpretation such an idea would be consistent with “all things.”

Second, if by “all things” Paul is referring to human beings, then 1:21-28 is not necessary. The fact is 1:21-28 explains why and how God reconciles human beings. Before salvation, believers were alienated from God and were enemies. But now because of *their response to the gospel and to Christ*, they are reconciled to God on the basis of the death of Christ.¹² The believers of Colossae heard the gospel and responded to the message (1:23). Paul explains that he preaches and *warns every man* (1:28) a ministry unnecessary if Bell is correct about the future reconciliation.

Third, the point of 1:20 is the rebuttal that any part of creation is outside the scope of reconciliation. The parallel passage may be Romans 8:38, 39. Paul’s point is that the cross “effectively overcame every evil agent and rendered it powerless.”¹³ There is nothing in this passage suggesting that there is any form of second chance for the unbeliever in the next life unless Bell is a Universalist a claim he denies.

PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE BELL OMITTS

There are passages of Scripture that speak to the nature of hell which Bell omits. I consider two passages.

The first is 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10. The return of Jesus with His mighty angels and the imagery of a flaming fire set up the context of future judgment. The objects of His judgment are unbelievers who

¹² In the parallel of Ephesians 2:1-22, the point is clear also. Only those who have been made alive are reconciled to God. This refers to both Jews and Gentiles.

¹³ Ralph P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 60. Homer A. Kent, *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1978) 51, 52.

did not know God and did not respond to the gospel (1:8). They will be punished defined as everlasting destruction.¹⁴ The term Paul uses comes from OT passages that speak of the coming prophetic judgment.¹⁵ This destruction is not a reference to annihilation. Paul defines the eternal destruction as the separation of unbelievers from His glorious presence revealed at the second coming of Jesus Christ (1:9). Because the believers *responded to the gospel* (1:10), they will enjoy the presence of the glorified Savior. Those who did not believe in this life do not have a second chance sometime in the afterlife. Unbelievers are judged and separated from the glorified Jesus Christ. There is no basis to suggest that love wins as defined by Bell.

A second passage is Revelation 20:11-15. John describes the Great White Throne Judgment at which time all unbelievers present for the final judgment. The basis for the judgment is twofold. First, they were judged according to their deeds (20:12). Second, the names of the unbelievers were not found in the book of life (20:12, 15). Unbelievers will be cast into the Lake of Fire (20:14, 15). This is the second death. In contrast believers have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them (20:6). The Lord referred to the eternal lake of fire also (Matt 25:41). There is no evidence that love wins as defined by Bell.

Bell does discuss the eternal state of Revelation 21 and 22 (pp. 111-115). He speculates about why the gates of New Jerusalem are not shut. People are free to come and go. He asks, "Can God bring proper, lasting justice, banishing certain actions—and people who do them—from the new creation while at the same time allowing and waiting and hoping for the possibility of the reconciliation of those very same people? Keeping the gates, in essence, open?" (p. 155).

While he speculates about how love might win, he misses the larger context. The new city is called *holy* Jerusalem (21:2). The reason the gates are open is because there is no sin in the new heaven

¹⁴ The term *tinō* (punished) means "to experience something bad, often in retribution for some wrongdoing" (Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 90.77). BDAG, 1006.

¹⁵ *DNTT*, vol. 1, 465.

and earth. All unbelievers have been judged and are in the lake of fire (21:8). The phrase, which is the second death, clearly connects this passage back to the Great White Throne Judgment (20:14). The city itself is filled with the *glory* of God (21:11). The Lamb was in the presence of the city such that there was no need for a temple (21:22). There was no need for the sun or moon because the *glory* of God is the light (21:23). Only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life are present (21:27). There is no place for Bell's creative speculation even if he attributes that creativity to God Himself.¹⁶ There is no evidence at the end of the Bible that love wins as defined by Bell.

BELL'S USE OF POSTMODERN LANGUAGE

One should not miss Bell's use of postmodernism language. I sight two examples. First, Bell suggests that there are various *perspectives* with reference to the definition of hell throughout church history. He claims that the Christian faith is generous enough to handle the vast a range of *perspectives*. The implication is clear. Those who hold the more traditional view must tolerate those like Bell who do not. Either position is consistent with the gospel. He writes, "To shun, censor, or ostracize someone for holding this belief [of hell] 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. 111; emphasis mine).

Second, Bell uses the notion of *story*. The basis for choosing a position is not necessarily the assumption that one position is correct. Rather, the issue is which position has *the better story*. Bell writes, "It's important that we be honest about the fact that some stories are better than others." The conservative view in which unbelievers are tortured forever isn't a very good story. Bell has a better story. He writes, "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

¹⁶ He writes, "Potentials, possibilities, and the promise that God has an imagination and is not afraid to use it. Hard and fast, definitive declarations then, about how God will or will not organize the new world bust leave plenty of room for all kinds of those possibilities. This doesn't diminish God's justice or take less seriously the very real consequences of sin and rebellion, it simply acknowledges with humility the limits of our powers of speculation (p. 116).

expansive, more extraordinary, beautiful, and inspiring than any other story about the ultimate course history takes” (p. 111). If the goal of theology is to create a story in which at the end everyone “will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God” then we must admit love wins. However, such a story is not the story of the Bible.

The goal of theology is not to create a Jesus who is palatable, but to proclaim the truth of the gospel. The very center of that gospel is the righteousness and holiness of God. Paul thoroughly defines the gospel in the book of Romans. The question is significant. How can a righteous God reconcile the unrighteous who cannot meet the His righteous standard? The answer is God’s global plan of mercy.

The reason why unbelievers need God’s mercy is because they are unrighteous. Paul presents evidence that both Gentiles (Rom 1:18-32) and Jews (Rom 2:1-3:20) are unrighteous and thus are objects of God’s wrath. The message of hope is the gospel (Rom 1:13-17). The presentation of the message is critical for only in that message does the unbeliever learn about the righteousness of God (Rom 1:17). It is the death of Christ that provides the basis by which unbelievers meet the righteous standard of God (Rom 3:21-31). It is in this latter context that the issue is clear. Unbelievers fall short of the glory of God, not his love (Rom 3:23).

One should not under estimate the truth that God does love humanity (John 3:16). Paul is clear that God demonstrated His love by pointing unbelievers to the cross of Jesus Christ (Rom 5:8). God who is righteous acts in accordance with high standards of rectitude as he renders a favorable verdict freeing those who have faith in Jesus Christ of all charges (Rom 3: 26).¹⁷ While love motives His actions toward the ungodly, it is His righteous character that requires payment for sin. Jesus Christ paid that price in His death (Rom 3:21-25). Those who do not exercise faith in this life remain the objects of His eternal wrath and will suffer eternal punishment (Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8). Only those who are justified in this life escape the wrath of God (Rom 5:9; 8:1).

¹⁷ BDAG, 246-247.

IMPLICATIONS

First, how one responds to Jesus Christ in this life does matter. The passages to which I refer do not leave room to Bell's idea that hell is an intense experience of correction. There is no biblical evidence that there is hope for unbelievers in the life to come.

Second, though one is a pastor and is concerned about the practical matters of life that does not provide the basis to creatively tell a story that is more palatable to the congregation and the greater culture. A pastor must be first true to God's word and then teach the congregation that they might mature and learn to think through that truth in a practical manner. There is no room for sloppy exegesis in the ministry of a Christ-like leader.

Third, God's word is clear. Romans 16:17 teaches that we are to pay careful attention to those who are in dissention, those who are in the state of being in factious opposition.¹⁸ We are to pay careful attention to those who cause offenses—an action or circumstance that leads one to act contrary to a proper course of action or set of beliefs.¹⁹ The bench mark or the set of beliefs in this context is the gospel which Paul defines in the book of Romans. We are to respond by avoiding such individuals or keeping away from them. For many this is unkind and unloving. However, we must understand that God's truth trumps all. The expression of love apart from truth is not biblical love. As Christ-like leaders, we must speak the truth in love.

¹⁸ BDAG, 253.

¹⁹ BDAG, 931.