

*Love Wins* -- or Jesus Rescues?  
A Review of Rob Bell's Book  
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I've finally done it! After listening to Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* twice via mp3's, I've actually finished the physical book itself. HarperOne did a masterful job of promoting the book through a short video featuring Bell challenging the notion that billions upon billions of people will go to a place of eternal torment without any chance of rescue.

The blogosphere quickly cranked up and an old-timey (albeit digital) pamphlet war began between those who identified themselves as either pro-Bell or anti-Bell. The anti-Bellums were convinced that the second shoe had finally dropped and that Bell was self-identifying as a universalist who had come out of the closet. Some in that group suggested that he had flirted with universalism (the notion that all humans [and some even add Satan] will be saved in the end) in his earlier book *Velvet Elvis*.<sup>1</sup>

The pro-Bellums quickly attacked the attackers, arguing that arguing is not Christian, that we should not judge, that Bell isn't a universalist. "Afterall," some said, "he went on TV multiple times and *said* he is not a universalist!"<sup>2</sup> One defender even suggested that, given the complicated nature of language, we can't even be sure what the *gospel* really is.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-Bellums have made some excellent points, reminding us that universalism (if indeed Bell is a universalist) is not a new heresy, that we have a responsibility to "guard the good deposit entrusted to us" (2 Tim. 1:14), that we are to watch our life and doctrine closely (1 Tim. 4:16), that "men will not put up with sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:3), and that "savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31).

In this review let me make it clear that I am not anti-Bellum. Frankly, the questions he raises (and the answers he *seems* to give) are much more important than he is as a personality. [He's been referred to as a rock star, hip, mega-pastor whom *Time* magazine characterized as a minister who is putting the fun back in Fundamentalism].

Knowing what this book says and having a biblical response to it is absolutely critical -- for us as believers and especially for CIU and its mission. *Love Wins* raises

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<sup>1</sup> See his conclusion to his restaurant illustration: "So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross, he was reconciling 'all things, in heaven and on earth, to God.' All things, everywhere. This reality then isn't something that we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making." (*Velvet Elvis*, p. 146). He has also said, "Heaven is full of forgiven people. Hell is full of forgiven people."

<sup>2</sup> One of my students said we should simply take Bell at his word. This assumes that we are defining "universalism" in the same way, an issue we'll address later in this review.

<sup>3</sup> <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/challenging-three-cherished-evan.html>

questions (350 of them, by one person's count) about the definition of the gospel, the nature of God, the imperative of believing prior to one's death, the goodness of the good news as traditionally believed and passed on, and why ECPers (those of us who hold to the view known as eternal conscious punishment) neither throw good parties nor produce good art.

As a theologian, I read a lot of books that I describe as "boiling my blood before I get past the preface." These are books attacking the Christian faith (such as *Farewell to God* by Charles Templeton, *If Grace Is True* by Philip Gulley, *The Inescapable Love of God* by Thomas Talbot, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* by Spencer Burke, etc.) which show us where some of the battles are. I certainly don't read these books for spiritual nourishment, but for preparing for doctrinal -- and, hopefully, charitable -- engagement with those who are tinkering with or have abandoned the gospel. Sometimes such books come from family members.

### Some Positive Notes

Before I share what concerns me in Bell's book, a few compliments are in order. First, I am grateful for the massive topic Bell has taken on. After all, is there any subject bigger than the one described by his book's subtitle: "A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived"? Today's soft, self-help, Christian subculture seems allergic to dealing with substantial subjects, and I'm glad Bell has raised this one. And so, apparently, is the news media which has been standing in line to interview him.

I also appreciate Bell's passion, especially for those who have been turned off by poor representatives of Christ who have argued for the eternal lostness of *others* -- and seemed glad about it. Callous conservatism is antithetical to the heart of the gospel. The challenge of TRUTH + LOVE is a hard balance to achieve, but one that we dare not duck (Eph. 4:15).<sup>4</sup>

I'm also grateful for some of the pictures he paints of the abundant life in Christ that can be lived now and later enjoyed eternally. He's done a good job of attacking an other-worldly gospel that ignores the plight of this world and focuses only on *somewhere else*. He writes, "Life has never been about just 'getting in,' It's about thriving in God's good world. It's stillness, peace, and that feeling of your soul being at rest, while at the same time it's about asking things, learning things, creating things, and sharing it all with others who are finding the same kind of joy in the same good world." (179). Although I believe he sometimes overstates his case, Bell is right that many believers focus too much of their attention on getting *there* instead of asking how we can bring heaven down *here*.

### Jesus Rescues?

We need to be reminded that it is right to defend the faith, to challenge alternative perspectives to God's truth, to respond to positions that compromise the gospel. The serious Christian must be marked by a critical mind, *but not by a critical spirit*. There is a middle way between the extremes of being gullible and being hypercritical -- and that middle way is a careful, biblical evaluation of a position.

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<sup>4</sup> I particularly appreciate his advice that we ask people "which Jesus?" when they tell us that they have rejected Christ (7-9).

Three areas of criticism need to be touched on in this review:

First, I have to disagree with Bell's starting point. He says in the Preface that "Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us." (vii). It's quite an interesting study to look at verses in which Jesus Himself says why He came, such as Mt. 5:17; 10:34-35; Mk. 1:38; Lk. 12:49; Jn. 5:43; 6:38; 8:42; 9:39; 10:10; 12:46. These certainly teach much more than the idea that "Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us." Of course God's love for us was a paramount topic for Jesus, but was it "first and foremost"? How about coming to do the Father's will? . . . Was His purpose primarily about US?<sup>5</sup>

Second, I really have to comment about Bell's mocking tone throughout his book. Those of us who hold to eternal conscious punishment are, uh, roasted time and again by Bell's rhetoric. We are described as those who have "hijacked" the Jesus story and hold to a view that "is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear." (vii). "The plot has been lost," Bell says, "and it's time to reclaim it." (vii-viii). We have been guilty of "a massive exercise in missing the point." (x).

He appears to laugh at those protestors outside one of his meetings who were picketing his message, one wearing a T-shirt reading "Turn or Burn."

He mocks the concept that one's eternal destiny depends on what one *believes* (5-6, 27, 54-55, 82, 188).<sup>6</sup>

Referring to Paul's handing over Hymenaeus and Alexander to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (I Tim. 1:20), Bell writes, "Something in me wants to read that in a Darth Vader voice." (89). He then says, when you hand people over to Satan, "Is there paperwork involved?" (89).

He mentions several church websites that have doctrinal statements which include a belief in hell as eternal conscious punishment. He writes, "All this, on a website. Welcome to our church." (96). [I've checked Rob Bell's church's doctrinal statement, and there is nothing said about eternal lostness for anyone].<sup>7</sup>

Bell mocks the idea that God would say to some at the end of time, "Door's locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now, it's

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<sup>5</sup> One could easily argue that Jesus came to divide people from one another, based on their response to the gospel (Lk. 12: 52-54). Bell seems to contradict himself (about Jesus's story being first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us) when later he says that the Jesus story is about God rescuing all of creation, adding "Yes, it includes people." (134).

<sup>6</sup> "Belief" in the gospels involves much more than simply holding to a particular *opinion*. Unbelief is much more than having a different perspective. Unbelief is characterized as spiritual mutiny against God, it seems to me.

<sup>7</sup> "We believe the day is coming when Jesus will return to judge the world, bringing an end to injustice and restoring all things to God's original intent. God will reclaim this world and rule forever. The earth's groaning will cease and God will dwell with us here in a restored creation. On that day we will beat swords into tools for cultivating the earth, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, there will be no more death, and God will wipe away all our tears. Our relationships with God, others, ourselves, and creation will be whole. All will flourish as God intends. This is what we long for. This is what we hope for. And we are giving our lives to living out that future reality now." <http://marshill.org/believe/> accessed March 29, 2011.

too late.” (108). To be fair, he describes those who are knocking as “truly humbled, broken and desperate for reconciliation.” But the Bible gives no evidence of post-mortem repentance. Jesus speaks of the owner of the house having every right to deny entrance to those who demand to be welcomed in on their own terms at their convenience.<sup>8</sup> Should we keep the bad news of the gospel secret -- or is there no bad news in Bell’s gospel?

“How often do you slit the throat of a goat?”, Bell asks, in ridiculing the sacrificial system, apparently to begin his challenge of the penal-substitutionary view of the atoning work of Christ. He makes no mention that God Himself instituted Israel’s sacrificial system, but implies that it was culturally created and therefore no longer relevant to us. (123ff).

Even Bell’s grandmother fails to escape his criticism. Her picture of the cross providing rescue from hell in her home “gave [him] the creeps.” He describes that painting: “It’s as if Thomas Kinkade and Dante were at a party, and one turned to the other sometime after midnight and uttered that classic line ‘You know, we really should work together sometime . . .’” (22-23).

He suggests that the God of traditional Christians is schizophrenic. He loves you one moment, but when you die He will torture you forever if you die without believing the gospel. “Because if something is wrong with your God, if your God is loving one second and cruel the next, if your God will punish people for all of eternity for sins committed in a few short years, no amount of clever marketing or compelling language or good music or great coffee will be able to disguise that one, true, glaring, untenable, unacceptable, awful reality.” (175).

We Evangelicals put a lot of emphasis on the cruciality of believing the gospel. Bell’s following statement challenges that idea: “Our trusting, our change of heart, our believing God’s version of our story doesn’t bring it into existence, make it happen, or create it. It simply is.” (188).<sup>9</sup>

There is a place for well-chosen words of sarcasm,<sup>10</sup> but the topic of this book couldn’t be greater or more critical to today’s anesthetized agnostics.<sup>11</sup> He may believe that church history has focused too much on hell, that it has been the tail that has

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<sup>8</sup> 22 Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. 23 Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”

He said to them, 24 “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. 25 Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’

“But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’

26 “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’

27 “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’ (Lk. 13).

<sup>9</sup> Bell seems to ridicule the notion of “an age of accountability” which causes him to suggest infanticide as an act of mercy (4).

<sup>10</sup> Pastor John Piper’s succinct tweet “Farewell, Rob Bell,” when he heard about Bell’s book, is a case in point, I think.

<sup>11</sup> Is anyone else troubled that Bell concludes his Acknowledgements section at the end of the book with the words to his wife, “Kristen. Are you free Thursday night?” (200).

wagged the theological dog (McLaren).<sup>12</sup> But if hell is indeed everlasting, a more somber tone, I think, would have been more appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Third is the question of universalism. Here are some key statements from Bell that make many of us wonder if he is a universalist:

He argues that the Sodom and Gomorrah story is actually a story of hope of redemption for all (83-85).

“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*.” (86)

He advocates a remedial, rather than a retributive, view of hell: “Failure, we see again and again, isn’t final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction.” (88).

He uses the “handing over to Satan” text (I Tim. 1:20) to argue that “the most severe judgment falls squarely within the redemptive purposes of God in the world.” (90).<sup>14</sup>

God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2) -- Can one really believe that God doesn’t get what He wants? (Ch. 4- “Does God Get What God Wants?”) “Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants?” (98). “In the Bible, God is not helpless, God is not powerless, and God is not impotent.” (101). “Will ‘all the ends of the earth’ come, as God has decided, or only some? Will all feast as it’s promised in Psalm 22, or only a few? Will everybody be given a new heart, or only a limited number of people? Will God, in the end, settle, saying, ‘Well, I tried. I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure’? Will God shrug God-size shoulders and say, ‘You can’t always get what you want’?” (103).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Brian McLaren’s *The Last Word and the Word After That* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). Perhaps Bell’s referring to the issue of hell when he writes, “. . . some issues aren’t as big as people have made them.” (x).

<sup>13</sup> In the chapter entitled “Hell,” Bell writes: “. . . I as well have a hard time believing that somewhere down below the earth’s crust is a really crafty figure in red tights holding a three-pointed spear, playing Pink Floyd records backwards, and enjoying the hidden messages.” (70).

<sup>14</sup> One is reminded of the universalist Thomas Talbot’s treatment of II Thes. 1:9 (“They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might”) as a *redemptive* text! (see *The Inescapable Love of God* [Universal Publishers, 1999], pp. 92-98).

<sup>15</sup> Bell’s understanding is that God’s very greatness is dependent on whether God gets what God wants. He writes: “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. Sort of great. A little great.” (97-98). Those words ought to make us shudder. If he’s wrong in his view, such statements smack of blasphemy, don’t they?

He uses texts like Isaiah 25 (33-34), Philippians 2, Psalm 22, and Psalm 145 to emphasize that “All people. The nations. Every person, every knee, every tongue . . . So everybody who dies will kneel before God . . .” (99-101).

Speaking of the lost coin, sheep, and son in Luke 15, Bell says, “The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn’t give up until everything that was lost is found. This God simply doesn’t give up. Ever.” (101).

“Have billions of people been created only to spend eternity in conscious punishment and torment, suffering infinitely for the finite sins they committed in the few years they spent on earth? . . . in the end, will God give up?” (102).

“. . . there are others who [are] . . . trusting that there will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. As long as it takes, in other words.” (106-107).

“. . . 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).

He defends universalism as part of a long Christian tradition and cites universalists like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa (107). “. . . 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). “Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God’s unrelenting, infinite, expansive love?” (109). “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.” (109).

The universalist story is a better story, Bell argues. “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).<sup>16</sup>

Bell argues that the gates of the heavenly city will never shut (114). He implies that there will be eternal opportunities to turn and join God’s people in heaven (115).

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Howard (in an article about “The Parts Angels Play”) makes the point that “The Bible is the Book with the story in it. You have to follow how the author tells his story. You have to stick with his own emphases. You cannot go tooting off to write your own story and then call it his.”

“A gospel that repeatedly, narrowly affirms and bolsters the ‘in-ness’ of one group at the expense of the ‘out-ness’ of another group will not be true to the story that includes ‘all things and people in heaven and on earth.’” (135).

“. . . what God is doing in Christ is for everybody, every nation, every ethnic group, every tribe. Paul uses the expansive word ‘Gentiles’ -- a first-century way of saying ‘everybody else.’” (149).

“Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody.” (150-151). “What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody.” (155).

Bell uses the Luke 15 story to prove that it is a story of integration, not separation! (169-170). “The father’s love cannot be earned, and it cannot be taken away. It just is.” (187). “Our trusting, our change of heart, our believing God’s version of our story doesn’t bring it into existence, make it happen, or create it. It simply is.” (188).

Referring to Christ’s statement on the cross of “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” Bell says, “Jesus forgives them all, without their asking for it. Done. Taken care of. Before we could be good enough or right enough, before we could even believe the right things.” (189).

However, to be perfectly fair, there are several places where Bell seems to leave open the possibility that some will be eternally lost, that he is not a universalist, and that “love wins” can’t mean the overthrow of human freedom. For example, he says the following:

“Love demands freedom. It always has, and it always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God’s ways for us. We can have all the hell we want.” (113). If Bell means eternally, then is it not logical that love doesn’t win?

“We see people choose another way all the time. . . . So will those who have said no to God’s love in this life continue to say no in the next? Love demands freedom, and freedom provides that possibility. People take that option now, and we can assume it will be taken in the future.” (114).

Bell asks, “Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don’t need to resolve them or answer them because we can’t, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires.” (115).

The issue is not “Does God get what God wants?’ but ‘Do we get what we want?’” (116). “If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option.” (117). “If we want hell, if we want heaven, they are ours. That’s how love works. It can’t be forced, manipulated, or coerced. It always leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins.” (119).

I must say that I’m confused. Bell seems to offer over a dozen arguments (summarized at the end of this review) that all will be saved, then suggests that we can have all the hell we want and we can resist God’s love. If he means eternal hell, beyond this life, then God doesn’t get what He wants, the entire cosmos is not finally reconciled (in Bell’s sense) to God, and Bell’s story must include at least some who are forever separated from God. He can’t have it both ways.<sup>17</sup>

#### A Few Final Comments:

This is a critical discussion for all Evangelicals, especially those who identify with CIU’s mission to “impact the nations with the message of Christ.” Bell apparently wants to be taken seriously, for he has produced a 200-page treatise on how his gospel is better than that traditionally held by Evangelical Christians.<sup>18</sup> The pro-Bellums will perhaps focus on his “escape clauses” mentioned above, to argue that he does not deserve to be castigated as a universalist. Bell preemptively challenges expected criticism by saying, “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.” (111). He further writes, “. . . it is our responsibility to be extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people’s eternal destinies. As Jesus says, he ‘did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.’” (160). One could respond that making decisive, lasting judgments about people’s eternal destinies is *exactly* what Bell has been doing for 200 pages. Why are traditionalists wrong to do that (concerning eternal judgment), but Bell is right (in advocating universal reconciliation)?

Bell implies that universalism should be seen as a viable option in historic, orthodox Christianity, which simply isn’t true. Origen was not told, “You’ve got an

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<sup>17</sup> Is Bell or is he not a universalist? I believe he is an *inconsistent* universalist, using expressions which challenge traditional orthodoxy, but not clearly declaring himself as one. In many places he makes the same arguments and sounds very much at times like classic universalists such as Nels F.S. Ferre, John A.T. Robinson, and William Barclay. He also repeats some of the same arguments as those I call neo-universalists (some call themselves “Evangelical universalists”), such as Thomas Talbott, Philip Gulley, and Gregory MacDonald. See my chapter on universalism in *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell* (Christian Focus, 2003), chapter two.

<sup>18</sup> Apparently Bell is not concerned with being considered a “former” Evangelical. He jokes with USA TODAY: “I am not aware that labels are the highest form of goodness and truth.” He rebuffs critics who say he presents a Jesus-optional Christianity: “Jesus spoke of the renewal of all things. He said, ‘I have sheep who are not of this flock.’ Through him, extraordinary things are happening in the world. If saying that gets you banned from the E-club, so be it.” [http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20110314/hell14\\_st.art.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20110314/hell14_st.art.htm)



interesting perspective. But you're well within the Evangelical camp." No. Origen was *condemned* for his view.<sup>19</sup>

One is not surprised that Bell's orthodoxy is defended by heterodox writers like Greg Boyd and Brian McLaren. However, how can one not be unsettled at Eugene Peterson's jacket blurb for *Love Wins* which says, "It isn't easy to develop a biblical imagination that takes in the comprehensive and eternal work of Christ. . . . Rob Bell goes a long way in helping us acquire just such an imagination — without a trace of the soft sentimentality and without compromising an inch of evangelical conviction." In an interview Peterson suggested that Evangelicals need to re-examine their doctrines of hell and damnation.

*USA Today* reports that Richard Mouw, president of the world's largest Protestant seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, calls *Love Wins* "a great book, well within the bounds of orthodox Christianity and passionate about Jesus." The real hellacious fight, says Mouw, a friend of Bell, a Fuller graduate, is between "generous orthodoxy and stingy orthodoxy. There are stingy people who just want to consign many others to hell and only a few to heaven and take delight in the idea. But Rob Bell allows for a lot of mystery in how Jesus reaches people."<sup>20</sup>

Denny Burk writes: "I think this quote from Mouw portends the shape of the coming debate. Bell's book begs the question of whether or not universalism is within the bounds of orthodoxy. Mouw says yes, and I'm sure a number of others will join him. Watch closely those who rally to Bell going forward. There is a real dividing line here, and I don't think that is all bad ("No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." I Cor. 11:19). For evangelicals, there can hardly be a more serious question. I hope and pray that very few will follow Bell to the wrong side on this one."<sup>21</sup>

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary President Daniel Akin, on Twitter, said, "If theological inclusivism & hypothetical universalism is true [then] any rationale for missions is gutted. Why go? They do not need the gospel." Rustin J. Umstatter, assistant professor of theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Bell's views are "nothing more than a slickly packaged, well scripted rehash of Protestant liberalism."<sup>22</sup>

To summarize: Bell argues for universal reconciliation in the following ways:

1. Lostness can't be forever.
2. Hell is remedial, not retributive, punishment.
3. Even severe judgment can be used redemptively by God.
4. God's greatness hinges on His getting what He wants -- and He wants all to be saved.

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<sup>19</sup> Many argue for a clear condemnation of Origen for his universalism in The Fifth Ecumenical Council, The Second Council Of Constantinople, A.D. 553.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20110314/hell14\\_st.art.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20110314/hell14_st.art.htm)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.dennyburk.com/richard-mouw-on-“love-wins”/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://baptistpress.com/BPnews.asp?ID=34843>

5. Many Bible texts use words like "all," "every knee will bow," "the restoration of all things," etc.
6. The God of the Bible is not a God who gives up. Ever.
7. The creation of billions of people whose only possible fate is endless punishment is unacceptable.
8. Infinite punishment for finite sins is absurd.
9. God's eternal love will melt every heart.
10. Universalism has been a long-standing Christian tradition and merits inclusion in historic, Christian orthodoxy.
11. Universalism is a better story!
12. Universalism counters the in-ness versus out-ness of narrow conservative Christianity.
13. Universalism is a larger story and does not depend on our response for its truthfulness.

Bell says nothing about the wrath of God,<sup>23</sup> and avoids any serious discussion of the atoning work of Christ as a ransom for our sins.

There are really only three perspectives on eternal lostness. Some hold to annihilationism, the idea that the wicked will be put out of existence (sadly John Stott advocates this view). Some hold to universalism, the belief that all will eventually be saved. Others hold to the traditional view of eternal conscious punishment, which teaches that there will be two (not just one) categories of human beings in eternity: those who have been bought by the blood of Christ and those who have died still having the wrath of God on them (John 3:36).

Although he could have been clearer in *Love Wins* to remove confusion as to which view he holds, it appears he favors universalism, but does not care to wear the label.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps he will eventually see the inconsistency of his present position and declare with the popular universalist Philip Gulley: "Now I have a new formula. It too is simple and clear. It is the most compelling truth I've ever known. It is changing my life. It is changing how I talk about God. It is changing how I think about myself. It is changing how I treat other people. It brings me untold joy, peace, and hope. This truth is the best news I've ever heard, ever believed, and ever shared. I believe God will save every person."<sup>25</sup> I pray that such will not be the case, that Rob Bell repents of his present position, and that he returns to the true gospel.

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<sup>23</sup> See my study on God's wrath in *The Other Side of the Good News* as well as my article "Warning a Wrath-Deserving World: Evangelicals and the Overhaul of Hell," *The Emmaus Journal*, 2:7-21, Summer 1993. Bell does say that we do not need to be rescued from God (182).

<sup>24</sup> Some have said, "But he's denied being a universalist!" Yes, but he *redefines* universalism. He says he believes in hell, but that it will not be forever.

<sup>25</sup> *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (with James Mulholland), cited in <http://www.thedivineconspiracy.org/Z5238E.pdf>. Accessed March 30, 2011.