

Universal Salvation and Love Wins

Universal Salvation is an idea that has been creating controversy in the Christian Church since its earliest days. Around 215 in Alexandria, Origen argued that since the first fall (of Adam) was universal, so all, including Satan himself, have the chance to work back towards God's original purpose. All will be saved, since all come from God. Although the Church in both East and West turned its back on Origen's vision of a universal salvation (universalism), that was hardly the end of it.

Evagrius Ponticus (435-499), a leading monk in the Nile Delta, who influenced generations of monks to come, echoed Origen's universalism and repeatedly asserted that even those suffering in Hell kept those imperishable seeds of virtue. No wonder that the Church decided he was dangerous. But the idea lived on. Isaac, a seventh century monk from Qatar who was briefly the Bishop of Nineveh, took up the notion of Origen and Evagrius that in the end all will be saved. He wrote, "It is not [the way of] the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction."

While the Catholic Church rejected the idea of universalism, it did have a certain comforting appeal and, in fact, was reborn around 950 as the idea of a middle state between heaven and hell called Purgatory, a concept found nowhere in any Bible. In his monumental book, *Christianity: The First 3,000 Years*, Diarmaid MacCulloch describes this appeal, "Few people can regard their drearily unspectacular sins as justifying hellfire, but most would agree with the Alexandrians that life on earth provides hardly enough time to remedy even those sins and enter Heaven without further purgation. Penance could be done in this middle-state, which was time-limited, and which moreover had only one exit, not to Hell but to Paradise."

Universalism, with and without Purgatory, continued to be put forth over the centuries so it should be no surprise that a populist preacher raises it again today.

Rob Bell, pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., is nondenominational, but his popularity has crossed into conservative churches of all denominations. With a line of popular videos and books, he typically is seen as part of the emerging church movement. His latest book is titled *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.*"

In the book, Bell starts by asking many of the questions on everyone's mind: Does it really make sense that God is a loving, kind, compassionate God who wants to know people in a personal way, but if they reject this relationship with Jesus, they will be sent to hell where God will eternally punish them forever? Bell's answer? No.

Bell's views are nothing new and, in many ways, simply mirror liberal Protestantism. It is, though, extremely rare for a Christian leader with such a following among evangelicals to begin espousing views that contradict historical Christianity. The fact that he is such a gifted communicator makes his beliefs even more dangerous, his critics say.

Even the book's endorsements have been controversial. Eugene Peterson, who wrote *The Message* Bible paraphrase, endorsed it, as did Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary. Susan Smith, author of *Crazy Faith: Ordinary People; Extraordinary Lives* says in *The Washington Post*, "I am with Bell. At the end of the day, Christians ought to be the portrait of the divinity—a portrait that is splashed with all kinds

of people, who have done all kinds of things, embraced by a smiling God who loves them all. Just like our parents love us, no matter what, so does this God love us, no matter what.”

Most evangelical leaders, though, say the exclusivity of the Gospel and a literal heaven and hell are at the heart of Christianity. Yet in *Love Wins*, Bell redefines all three. He says the Gospel is exclusive—but also inclusive in that people worldwide will be saved even if they have not professed Christ. He affirms heaven—but says that Scripture sometimes defines it as the present day. He says he believes in hell—but then says it’s not a literal place but simply a synonym for suffering in the modern world.

On hell, Bell argues that Jesus in his many warnings about punishment was not referencing a literal hell in the afterlife, but instead evil and suffering on earth. At one point Bell anticipates the reader’s question and he asks, “Do I believe in a literal hell? Of course.” He then defines what he means: “Have you ever sat with a woman while she talked about what it was like to be raped? ... I’ve seen what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and kind and humane.”

Bell later writes, “So, when we read, ‘eternal punishment,’ it’s important that we don’t read categories and concepts into a phrase that aren’t there. Jesus isn’t talking about forever as we think of ‘forever.’” Bell elaborates, saying humans need a “word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God’s world God’s way.”

Bell wrote. “... What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe.”

What are the critics saying? Many such as Eugene Peterson love the book. Others aren’t so sure. Justin Taylor of Crossway Publishing called *Love Wins* a “one-dimensional view of God shrunk down to the size of Rob Bell’s own creative mind” that “fundamentally misses the Gospel story. It misses the holiness of the Creator God, the sinfulness and the fall of man, and the accomplishment of what Christ did.”

Denny Burk, dean of Boyce College, said the book “overemphasizes the love of God with little acknowledgment of God’s justice and wrath. But Paul says in Romans 12:19, the we must leave room for the wrath of God. One of the fundamental errors, I think, of this book is right there: There is no room for the wrath of God in Bell’s theology.”

In an interview, Bell said, *Love Wins* is not universalism per se, but I’m reminded that “a rose by any other name...” The big question in my mind is: How do you deal with it? The answer: Read and study the Bible.

[Portions of the above taken from a panel discussion of Christian leaders in Louisville, KY on March 17, 2011 posted by Michael Foust at <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=34843>]

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