

Book Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell

There has been a lot of talk about Rob Bell's latest book, *Love Wins*. Rob is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. He has built a large following through his provocative speaking style, punchy communication, and edgy unorthodoxy. Rob makes you think, and think hard.

Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived (HarperOne, 2011) is Rob's take on whether or not there is a literal heaven and hell and whether God's way of salvation is truly straight and narrow. Are "only a few saved" as Jesus declares in Luke 13? Really, only a few? Rob disagrees and says that a literal, eternal hell does not fit God's character. Rather, since God is best defined by "love," Rob suggests that in the end, love wins and everyone is reconciled to God (or at least is given the ongoing, eternal chance to reconcile.)

Before I record some of Rob's direct quotes from the book, let me say that it is important for folks to evaluate controversial materials for themselves. Be a critical thinker and tackle some of this stuff head-on for yourself. Just make sure that when you read anything—whether edgy or stuffy—that you compare it with scripture and the traditional stream of orthodox doctrine. Tradition gets a vote, not a veto, but it is an oversized ballot which demands your careful consideration.

Love Wins is a simple—but difficult—book to read.

First, simple: At 200 pages, it actually reads like 100 pages because the style is relatively poetic with much repetition and entire pages with single words per line. Rob likes to punch home his points by isolating them on lines by themselves.

And difficult: Rob's style is Socratic, spongy, esoteric, and sarcastic.

Socratic: He asks dozens and dozens of rhetorical questions and doesn't always bring those questions to conclusion. His questions come from his presuppositions which are not always clearly explained. Consequently, the reader gets picked up and taken for a ride in a vehicle of unknown origin to an uncertain destination. Rob also daisy-chains and rabbit-trails questions so that it is sometimes hard to follow the progression of his thought. The reader ends up muddled and confused.

Spongy: I felt like Rob was trying to make philosophical points while playing Chubby Bunny—the game where you add marshmallows to your mouth while trying to say the phrase "Chubby Bunny." That is, the prose is gooey around the edges and so are the arguments. What did he just say? Did you catch that? What? Slubby Bwunny? Speak up Rob! Be clear! Spit out the marshmallow and say what you mean! I felt the same way reading this book as I did attending a service at the local Hare Krishna temple: dazed, confused, and slightly irritated at the lack of clarity. Rob's style is very eastern, if I may say so, and that carries with it positive aspects of mystery as well as confusing elements of frustrating uncertainty to the western mind.

Esoteric: "Esoteric" is just a big word for the secretive use of allusions which only an enlightened few can understand. Rob delights in digging out novel interpretations of normally clear passages and stringing these questionable interpretations into spun-sugar arguments.

Sarcastic: Rob uses sarcasm as an edged tool to excavate his arguments while throwing dirt on the orthodox tradition. But shoveling mud also leaves the writer somewhat soiled.

Quotes from the Book (direct quotes in quotation marks, summarized points without quotation marks):

p.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."

p.110 - God is a good author but hell is a bad story, so hell must not actually exist.

p.115 - Heaven's gates are never shut so people can come and go forever, and this means that for all eternity people can choose to go back and forth between "heaven and hell," whatever those words mean.

p.119 - We can change our minds and be reconciled in eternity to God because God gives us what we want always because that's what love does, because in the end love wins.

pp.128-129 - The blood of Christ is a passe metaphor of sacrifice. Primitive cultures use terms like that, not ours.

p.150 - "Jesus is bigger than any one religion... He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain and name him, especially the one called 'Christianity.'"

p.154 - People come to God through Jesus, whether they call it that or not.

p.155 - There is an "exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity. 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. He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation."

p.160 - "We can name Jesus, orient our lives around him, and celebrate him as the way, the truth, and the life, and at the same time respect the vast, expansive, generous mystery that he is."

p.169 - Using the older son in Luke 15 as an example of a "hellish" attitude at a heavenly party, Rob says that "Hell is being a the party. That's what makes it so hellish."

p.170 - Heaven and Hell: "It's not an image of separation, but one of intergration. In this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other."

p.170 - "Hell is our refusal to trust God's retelling of our story."

p.171 - "What the gospel does is confront our version of our story with God's version of our story."

p.175 - "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."

p.176 - "What we see in the older brother [from Luke 15] is that our beliefs matter. They are incredibly important. Our beliefs shape us and guide us and determine our lives... We are free to accept or reject the invitation to new life that God extends to us. Our choice. We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both at the party."

p.184 - "We shape our God, and then our God shapes us."

p.189 - "Forgiveness is unilateral and so we are saved in our death, and in our life. The only thing left to do is trust. Everybody is at the party. Heaven and hell, here, now, around us, upon us, within us."

pp.196-197 - Biblical images of judgment "are strong, shocking images of judgment and separation in which people miss out on rewards and celebrations and opportunities."

p.197 - Our choices matter incredibly because we won't have this moment again and there are consequences to our choices, but grace is always there to pick us up again.

Conclusion: Rob's exegesis is disappointing. He seems to play fast-and-loose with scripture, speaks authoritatively about subjects which demand more nuance and at least a nod to the vast majority of orthodox tradition, and seems to delight in his own confident provocation.

Love Wins definitely makes you think about the mysterious breadth of God's love—and that's a good thing—but it also teeters and seems to fall off the wagon of responsible exegesis. Rob is charismatic and authoritative, but he may not be right. A simple reading of Scripture at face value, as always, should accompany any consideration of deliciously unorthodox positions. Read this book cautiously and beware the intoxication of beautiful words spun around the diminishing cone of one man's flamboyant opinion.

- Stephen A. Smith, Th.M.

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