

Rob Bell's *Love Wins* – taking its toll among evangelicals?

Rob Bell could be characterised as a young, hip and trendy preacher, media savvy and culturally alert. He is the founding Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids Michigan which since its beginning's in 1999 now has a Sunday congregation of over 10,000.

He is best known for high quality DVD's entitled Nooma (a phonetic transliteration of the Greek word for "spirit"). These are 12-14 minute teaching resources. They are intended to be "visually stunning and emotionally compelling".

Much ink has already been spilt over Rob Bell's recent book *Love Wins*. The advanced publicity caused quite a stir, but I think that was the point. I have refrained from making comment on the book until I have read it, and I have also read quite a bit of blog comment subsequently.

Up until now I have been pretty positive about Rob Bell and commend him in a forthcoming book on preaching ("Excellence in Preaching", IVP 2011). He is a great communicator. But, like many others, I was taken aback by the advance publicity in mid March (see HarperCollins <http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Love-Wins-Rob-Bell/?isbn=9780062049636>). Now, with the book on the market, it is sure to be a bestseller: not least because there must be many others who, like me, have bought it to see what he *really* says.

Some generally positive comments:

He asks good questions. This is one feature of the Nooma DVDs. Asking difficult questions elicits empathy from the hearer and also shows due self-awareness that teachers don't necessarily have all the answers.

He is a good verbal communicator. His style is engaging, relaxed and humorous; thousands flock to Mars Hill Church every week to hear him preach.

He is keen to win those who may have been disenfranchised by the Church. He is convinced that many have heard a wrong view of the Christian faith, namely, that in this short life-span on earth a decision made for or against Jesus Christ determines whether they spend eternity in hell or eternity in heaven.

- *[God's] love compels us to question some of the dominant stories that are being told as the Jesus story. 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 Jesus. This 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 (p.viii).*

He demonstrates the power of story to change lives. The Gospel is God's story, which has the ability to transform your story and reconnect you with the author. And the story of the Bible is bigger than rescuing people from hell (see p.134).

He is keen to emphasise the positive message about the love of God.

Love does indeed win, (see Rev 21:5-7). I am with him when he says we need fresh and engaging ways to communicate this message:

I want to rescue preaching. I believe it's an art form and I want to rescue it back from the scientists and the analysts. I want to see the poets and the prophets and the artists grab the microphone and say great things about God and the revolution. I think a whole art form has been lost that needs to be recaptured, a grand ambition for the art of preaching. (The Subversive Art Leadership Journal January 2004).

Some genuine concerns:

He does not always give clear answers where clear answers are available. He claims: *this isn't a book of questions. It's a book of responses to these questions.* But is it? Chapter after chapter is full of questions. If Bell is not clear in his mind on these matters should he not keep his questions to himself? And, as Job learned, not all questions are good ones to ask; indeed God asks the most searching questions of us (Gen 3:9; Job 38).

He is a better speaker than writer. I do not think that Bell is a great writer. It is partly because the written word does not enable the same kind of engagement that the spoken word does: inflection, nuance, eye contact, non-verbal and para-verbal issues; all these come across well in his speaking. But there is more:

He is in danger of knocking down straw men/ being disingenuous

One of the better chapters is "The Good News is better than that" (Chapter 7). Here he emphasises the fact that both sons in Luke 15 had misunderstood God; they had a skewed idea of the Father's love and goodness. Is he charging Evangelicals of being too Older Brother/Pharisaic? Is he saying that the Church generally does not preach enough the message that "Love wins"?

His questions have prompted a few questions of my own: what is the target at which *Love Wins* is aimed?

Is this a debate about legalism?

So when we hear that a certain person has "rejected Christ," we should first ask, "Which Christ?" (p.9). In Chapter 9 he cites websites which are, quite frankly harsh, off putting and hardly the most winsome in welcoming non-Christians into Church! His worry is that the "Turn or Burn" placard is toxic and inherently dangerous to the Church.

His corrective is to emphasise that God “gets what he wants” and “love will win.” Of course there are religious fundamentalists who give the Christ of Christianity a very bad name (note Louis Theroux’s recent TV exposé of some of the worst extremes). Richard Mouw argues that this book is about the gap between “generous orthodoxy” and “stingy orthodoxy.” But Bell’s problem is not with a fanatical fringe, but rather he seems to be suggesting that **mainline churches** have been mistaken over the biblical teaching of hell and have got the message wrong.

Is the issue over Universalism or Annihilationism?

There is a legitimate evangelical debate over whether the Bible envisages unending torment for the wicked in hell.

John Stott argues that the biblical language of “destruction” and “fire” (as consuming) implies that hell will not be unending. The nature of God’s justice questions whether “eternal conscious torment” is compatible with biblical revelation of divine justice (*Evangelical Essentials*, p.319). Universalism is an unbiblical concept, he states, not least because of the repeated warnings of the Bible about judgment. Nevertheless Stott pleads that ‘the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment’ (p.320).

Evangelical contemporary, Jim Packer, responds saying that the Scriptural language of “destruction, death and punishment” point to the ruin of unbelievers, not necessarily their non existence. Human beings have an eternity: either to intimate relationship with God or eternal distance from God. References to “eternal punishment” following judgment (see Matt 25:46) need to be taken seriously. (See: *The Problem of Eternal Punishment*, Fellowship of Word and Spirit, Orthos 10).

Some of Bell’s concerns relate to this issue of “the eternity of hell.” But he goes much further. He asks: what does it mean when Jesus says he will draw all people to himself (John 12:32)?

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).

God’s goal in all things is restoration and reconciliation: *Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God’s unrelenting, infinite, expansive love?* But a few pages later he asks: *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 (p.114).*

There is a conundrum here: Bell argues that love can not be coerced and we get the hell (or heaven) we choose. But, he argues: in the end, “love wins.”

Is the issue over penal substitution?

Considerable controversy was raised in the evangelical world over Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus*. In this book Chalke likens penal substitution to "cosmic child abuse." Some of what Bell writes sounds similarly concerned:

However true or untrue [that Jesus paid the price for sin] is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God (p.182).

So, what happened at the cross? Is the cross about the end of the sacrificial system or a broken relationship that's been reconciled or a guilty defendant who's been set free or a battle that's been won or the redeeming of something that was lost? Which is it? (p.127).

The traditional evangelical answer has been: God is holy; there is sin; there will be a judgement; and that is why we need a cross to rescue us. As with the Steve Chalke debate, we do well to remember that the cross is more than penal substitution (which Bell helpfully points out in chapter 5), but, we say too little if we don't put at the heart of the Gospel Christ's "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world" (as the Book of Common Prayer so eloquently puts it).

Is the issue over the nature of the new heaven and the new earth?

Is heaven and hell to do with the eternal life hereafter? Bell's corrective is spot on: it starts with "life eternal." This is reflected in the prayer Jesus taught: "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Bell's thoughts about the new heaven and the new earth clearly have been influenced by Tom Wright's *Surprised by Hope* which he cites for further reading.

He is right to say:

- *Heaven, for Jesus, was deeply connected with what he called "this age" and "the age to come." (p.30).*
- Equally, discussions about "eternal life" have as much to do with life "now" as life "then" (e.g. p.41).
- Heaven is dwelling with God; and when we dwell with God the future is dragged into the present (p.45).

Do I believe in a literal hell? Of course. (p.71) – so that settles it? Well no, because for the most part, Hell is what is experienced now on earth when people reject God: if we want to say "no" to God, we can, and that is hell.

He notes the way in which Jesus speaks about Hell to religious leaders of his day as a place of purifying. Then he concludes: the punishment of hell is for chastening,

rebuking and purifying. God is in the business of restoration: *Failure, we see again, isn't final; judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction* (p.88).

It certainly seems that Bell doubts the eternity of hell: Hell is distance from God and hell is lived on earth. But, I was also left asking: does he believe in an eternal heaven? I think he does but the book is not clear on this point: for him, heaven should be read as synonymous with "God." As he rightly corrects errors in popular views about heaven, I wonder whether he has lost any sense of the hereafter.

Conclusion

- ***Unhelpful advanced publicity***
 - The short video promotional focused on a response he records in chapter one of the book: "Gandhi's in hell. Really? ... Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish?" Surely this served no other purpose than to stir up an unholy ferment ahead of publication.
- ***Unhelpful reactions***
 - Following the initial publicity some initial comments, including from high profile speakers, were quite sharp. I do not think that it helps to respond in this hasty way before the book was published and available for careful review.
 - Better was the debate between John Stott and David Edwards in *Essentials* which is a great model of how to disagree agreeably! See also chapter 6 of their book for extended discussion on Judgement and Hell.
- ***Ultimately an unhelpful book***

Bell begins with a key question:

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?

I think the Bible seems to say: quite probably; Bell thinks no. Surely the point is God never made me the Judge!

Of course we do not know the answer to every question. But some things are very clear: God will judge the wicked and the only way to be saved is through faith in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. James 3 instruction to teachers sounds a sharp warning, Bell!

- **Further blogs/resources**

Ben Witherington: chapter by chapter analysis of the book

<http://www.patheos.com/community/bibleandculture/2011/04/03/for-whom-the-bell-tolls%e2%80%a6%e2%80%a6-chapter-eight-coda/>

Richard Mouw: a more positive review <http://www.christianpost.com/news/the-orthodoxy-of-rob-bell-49500/>

Christianity Today <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/april/lovewins.html> and http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2011/02/rob_bells_book.html

A measure and helpful response: EA and Derek Tidball

<http://www.eauk.org/articles/love-wins-response.cfm>

Best title: Michael Horton "Bell's Hell" <http://wscal.edu/blog/entry/bells-hell-a-review-by-michael-horton-part-1>

Tim Challies [http://www.challies.com/articles/at-the-speed-of-the-web?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+challies/XhEt+\(Challies+Dot+Com\)](http://www.challies.com/articles/at-the-speed-of-the-web?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+challies/XhEt+(Challies+Dot+Com))

Michael Youssef <http://michaelyoussef.squarespace.com/michaels-blogs/love-has-already-won.html> with retort from Virtue online

<http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=14160>

For fun: Don Miller <http://emergingbracken.blogspot.com/2011/04/don-miller-on-rob-bells-new-book-love.html>

Some important resources from recent Gospel Coalition conference in Chicago

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>

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