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## Universalism as a Lure? The Emerging Case of Rob Bell

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As is so often the case, most of us first learned of Rob Bell's new book by means of Justin Taylor and his blog, "[Between Two Worlds](#)," at the Gospel Coalition. Justin reminds me of the steady folks at the National Hurricane Center. He is able to advise of looming disaster with amazing calmness. That is why I took special notice of Justin's stern warning: "It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine."

Why would Justin feel the need to issue such a warning? He was writing about Rob Bell's forthcoming book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, due to be released on March 29 by HarperCollins.

The publisher's statement about the book is clearly intended to provoke controversy:

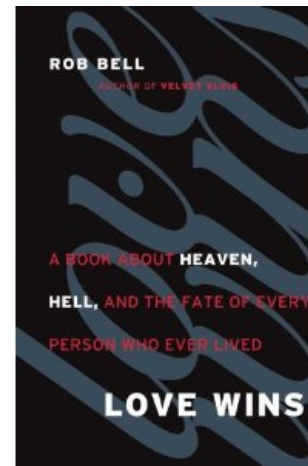
*Fans flock to his Facebook page, his NOOMA videos have been viewed by millions, and his Sunday sermons are attended by 10,000 parishioners—with a downloadable podcast reaching 50,000 more. An electrifying, unconventional pastor whom Time magazine calls "a singular rock star in the church world," Rob Bell is the most vibrant, central religious leader of the millennial generation. Now, in Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived, Bell addresses one of the most controversial issues of faith—the afterlife—arguing that a loving God would never sentence human souls to eternal suffering. With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial, and his message is decidedly optimistic—eternal life doesn't start when we die; it starts right now. And ultimately, Love Wins.*

Now, Rob Bell and others within the Emerging Church movement represent what can only be described as a new form of cultural Christianity. Bell plays with theology the way a cat plays with a mouse. His sermons, videos, books, and public relations are often more suggestive and subversive than clear. They are also artistically and aesthetically superior to most of what is to be found in the video section of your local Christian bookstore or on the Web.

Time is running out on the Emerging folks. They can play the game of suggestion for only so long. Eventually, the hard questions will be answered. Tragically, when the answers do come, as with the case of Brian McLaren, they appear as nothing more than a mildly updated form of Protestant liberalism.

The publicity surrounding Bell's new book indicates that he is ready to answer one of the hardest questions — the question of the exclusivity of the Gospel of Christ. With that question come the related questions of heaven, hell, judgment, and the fate of the unregenerate. The Bible answers these questions clearly enough, but few issues are as hard to reconcile with the modern or postmodern mind than this. Of course, it was hard to reconcile with the ancient mind as well. The singularity of the person and work of Christ and the necessity of personal faith in him for salvation run counter to the pluralistic bent of the human mind, but this is nothing less than the wisdom of God and the power of God unto salvation.

Universalism and the various inclusivisms are exactly what Justin Taylor suggests — distortions of the Gospel that



deceive the people of God (and non-Christians as well).

But what if all this is just clever advertising? What if Rob Bell's book turns out to be an affirmation of the truth? Did Justin jump the gun?

There is good reason to doubt this. The most powerful argument about the book comes in the form of a video offered by Rob Bell himself. In the video, he pulls no punches. In his clever and artistic way, ever so artfully presented, he affirms what can only be described as universalism.

We must await the release of the full book in order to know what Rob Bell is really saying, but his advance promotion for the book is already saying something, and it is not good. The material he has already put forth does demand and deserve attention.

The Emerging Church movement is known for its slick and sophisticated presentation. It wears irony and condescension as normal attire. Regardless of how Rob Bell's book turns out, its promotion is the sad equivalent of a theological striptease.

The Gospel is too precious and important to be commodified in this manner. The questions he asks are too important to leave so tantalizingly unanswered. Universalism is a heresy, not a lure to use in order to sell books. This much we know, almost a month before the book is to be released.

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