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We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the (Re)Emergence of Liberal Theology

In this new book, Rob Bell takes his stand with those who have tried to rescue Christianity from itself. This is a massive tragedy by any measure.

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The novelist Saul Bellow once remarked that being a prophet is nice work if you can get it. The only problem, he suggested, is that sooner or later a prophet has to speak of God, and at that point the prophet has to speak clearly. In other words, the prophet will have to speak with specificity about who God is, and at that point the options narrow.

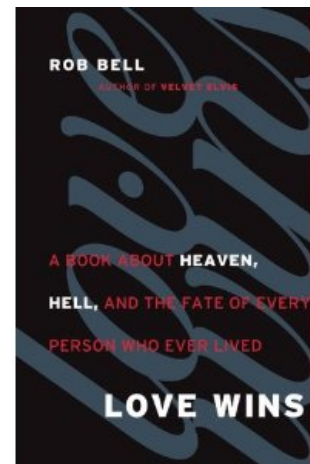
For the last twenty years or so, a movement identified as emerging or emergent Christianity has done its determined best to avoid speaking with specificity. Leading figures in the movement have offered trenchant criticisms of mainstream evangelicalism. Most pointedly, they have accused evangelical Christianity, variously, as being excessively concerned with doctrine, culturally tone-deaf, overly propositional, unnecessarily offensive, aesthetically malnourished, and basically uncool.

Many of their criticisms hit home — especially those rooted in cultural concerns — but others betrayed what can only be described as an awkward relationship with orthodox Christian theology. From the very beginning of the movement, many of the emerging church's leaders called for a major transformation in evangelical theology.

And yet, even as many of these leaders insisted that they remained within the evangelical circle, it was clear that many were moving into a post-evangelical posture. There were early hints that the direction of the movement was toward theological liberalism and radical revisionism, but the predominant mode of their argument was suggestion, rather than assertion.

Rather than make a clear theological or doctrinal assertion, emerging figures generally raise questions and offer suggestive comments. Influenced by postmodern narrative theories, most within the movement lean into story rather than formal argument. Nevertheless, the general direction seemed clear enough. The leading emerging church figures appeared to be pushing Protestant Liberalism — just about a century late.

Protestant Liberalism emerged in the 19th century as influential theologians argued for a doctrinal revolution. Their challenge to the church was simple and straightforward: The intellectual challenges of the modern age made belief in traditional Christian doctrines impossible. Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote his impassioned speeches to the “cultured despisers” of religion, arguing that something of spiritual value remained in Christianity even when its doctrines were no longer credible. Church historians, such as Adolf von Hamack, argued that a kernel of spiritual truth and power remained



even when the shell of Christianity's doctrinal claims was removed. In the United States, preachers such as Harry Emerson Fosdick preached that Christianity must come to terms with the modern age and surrender its supernatural claims.

The liberals did not set out to destroy Christianity. To the contrary, they were certain that they were rescuing Christianity from itself. Their rescue effort required the surrender of the doctrines that the modern age found most difficult to accept, and the doctrine of hell was front and center on their list of doctrines that must go.

As historian Gary Dorrien of Union Theological Seminary — the citadel of Protestant Liberalism — has observed, it was the doctrine of hell that marked the first major departures from theological orthodoxy in the United States. The early liberals just could not and would not accept a doctrine of hell that included conscious eternal punishment and the pouring out of God's wrath upon sin.

Thus, they rejected it. They argued that the doctrine of hell, though clearly revealed in the Bible, slandered God's character. They offered proposed evasions of the Bible's teachings, revisions of the doctrine, and the rejection of what the church had affirmed throughout its long history. By the time the 20th century came to a close, liberal theology had largely emptied the mainline Protestant churches and denominations. As it turns out, theological liberalism is not only a rejection of biblical Christianity — it is a failed attempt to rescue the church from its doctrines. At the end of the day, a secular society feels no need to attend or support secularized churches with a secularized theology. The denial of hell did not win relevance for the liberal churches. It simply misled millions about their eternal destiny.

This brings us to the controversy over Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*. As its cover announces, the book is "about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived." Reading the book is a heart-breaking experience. We have read this book before. Not the exact words, and never so artfully presented, but the same book, the same argument, the same attempt to rescue Christianity from the Bible.

As a communicator, Rob Bell is a genius. He is the master of the pungent question, the turn-the-picture-upside-down story, and the personal anecdote. Like Harry Emerson Fosdick, the paladin of pulpit liberalism, Rob Bell is a master communicator. Had he set out to defend the biblical doctrine of hell, he could have done so marvelously. He would have done the church a great service. But that is not what he set out to do.

Like Fosdick, Rob Bell cares deeply for people. It comes through in his writings. There is no reason to doubt that Bell wrote this book out of his own personal concern for people who are put off by the doctrine of hell. Had that concern been turned toward a presentation of how the biblical doctrine of hell fits within the larger context of God's love and justice and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that would have been a help to untold thousands of Christians and others seeking to understand the Christian faith. But that is not what Bell does in this new book.

Instead, Rob Bell uses his incredible power of literary skill and communication to unravel the Bible's message and to cast doubt on its teachings.

He states his concern clearly: *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' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.*

That is a huge statement, and it is clear enough. Rob Bell believes that the doctrine of the eternal punishment of unrepentant sinners in hell is keeping people from coming to Jesus. That is an unsettling thought, but on closer look, it falls in upon itself. In the first place, Jesus spoke very clearly about hell, using language that can only be described as explicit. He warned of "him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." [Matthew 10:28]

In *Love Wins*, Bell does his best to argue that the church has allowed the story of Jesus' love to be perverted by other stories. The story of an eternal hell is not, he believes, a good story. He suggests that a better story would involve the possibility of a sinner coming to faith in Christ after death, or hell being a cessation of being, or hell being eventually emptied of all its inhabitants. The problem, of course, is that the Bible provides no hint whatsoever of any possibility of a sinner's salvation after death. Instead, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." [Hebrews

9:27]

He also argues for a form of universal salvation. Once again, his statements are more suggestive than declarative, but he clearly intends his reader to be persuaded that it is possible — even probable — that those who resist, reject, or never hear of Christ may be saved through Christ nonetheless. That means no conscious faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. He knows that he must deal with a text like Romans 10 in making this argument, “How are they to hear without someone preaching?” [Romans 10:14] Bell says that he wholeheartedly agrees with that argument from the Apostle Paul, but then he dumps the entire argument overboard and suggests that this cannot be God’s plan. He completely avoids Paul’s conclusion that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” [Romans 10:17] He rejects the idea that a person must come to a personal knowledge of Christ in this life in order to be saved. “What if the missionary gets a flat tire?” he asks.

But this is how Rob Bell deals with the Bible. He argues that the gates that never shut in the New Jerusalem [Revelation 21:25] mean that the opportunity for salvation is never closed, but he just avoids dealing with the preceding chapter, which includes this clear statement of God’s justice: “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” [Revelation 20:15] The eternally open gates of the New Jerusalem come only after that judgment.

Like so many others, Bell wants to separate the message of Jesus from other voices even in the New Testament, particularly the voice of the Apostle Paul. Here we face the inescapable question of biblical authority. We will either affirm that every word of the Bible is true, trustworthy, and authoritative, or we will create our own Bible according to our own preferences. Put bluntly, if Jesus and Paul are not telling the same story, we have no idea what the true story is.

Bell clearly prefers inclusivism, the belief that Christ is saving humanity through means other than the Gospel, including other religions. But he mixes up his story along the way, appearing to argue for outright universalism on some pages, but backing off of a full affirmation. He rejects the belief that conscious faith in Christ is necessary for salvation, but he never clearly lands on a specific account of what he does believe.

Tellingly, Bell attempts to reduce all of the Bible and the entirety of the Gospel to story, and he believes it is his right and duty to determine which story is better than another — which version of Christianity is going to be compelling and attractive to unbelievers. He has, after all, set that as his aim — to replace the received story with something he sees as better.

The first problem with this is obvious. We have no right to determine which “story” of the Gospel we prefer or think is most compelling. We must deal with the Gospel that we received from Christ and the Apostles, the faith once for all delivered to the church. Suggesting that some other story is better or more attractive than that story is an audacity of breathtaking proportions. The church is bound to the story revealed in the Bible — and in all of the Bible ... every word of it.

But there is a second problem, and it is one we might think would have been learned by now. Liberalism just does not work. Bell wants to argue that the love of God is so powerful that “God gets what God wants.” So, God desires the salvation of all, he argues, so all will eventually be saved — some even after death, even long after death. But he cannot maintain that account for long because of his absolute affirmation of human autonomy. Even God cannot or will not prevent someone from going to hell who is determined to go there. So, if Bell is taken on his own terms, even he does not believe that “God gets what God wants.”

Similarly, Bell’s argument is centered in his affirmation of God’s loving character, but he alienates love from justice and holiness. This is the traditional liberal line. Love is divorced from holiness and becomes mere sentimentality. Bell wants to rescue God from any teaching that his wrath is poured out upon sin and sinners, certainly in any eternally conscious sense. But Bell also wants God to vindicate the victims of murder, rape, child abuse, and similar evil. He seems not to recognize that he has undercut his own story, leaving God unable or unwilling to bring true justice.

In truth, any human effort to offer the world a story superior to the comprehensive story of the Bible fails on all fronts. It is an abdication of biblical authority, a denial of biblical truth, and a false Gospel. It misleads sinners and fails to save. It also fails in its central aim — to convince sinners to think better of God. The real Gospel is the Gospel that saves — the Gospel that must be heard and believed if sinners are to be saved.

But this is where Rob Bell's book goes most off-course. He describes the Gospel in these words:

It begins in the sure and certain truth that we are loved. That in spite of whatever has gone horribly wrong deep in our hearts and has spread to every corner of the world, in spite of our sins, failures, rebellion, and hard hearts, in spite of what has been done to us or what we've done, God has made peace with us.

Missing from his Gospel is any clear reference to Christ, any adequate understanding of our sin, any affirmation of the holiness of God and his pledge to punish sin, any reference to the shed blood of Christ, his death on the cross, his substitutionary atonement, and his resurrection, and, so tellingly, any reference to faith as the sinners response to the Good News of the Gospel. There is no genuine Gospel here. This is just a reissue of the powerless message of theological liberalism.

H. Richard Niebuhr famously once distilled liberal theology into this sentence: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Yes, we have read this book before. With *Love Wins*, Rob Bell moves solidly within the world of Protestant Liberalism. His message is a liberalism arriving late on the scene. Tragically, his message will confuse many believers as well as countless unbelievers.

We dare not retreat from all that the Bible says about hell. We must never confuse the Gospel, nor offer suggestions that there may be any way of salvation outside of conscious faith in Jesus Christ. We must never believe that we can do a public relations job on the Gospel or on the character of God. We must never be unclear and subversively suggestive about what the Bible teaches.

In the opening pages of *Love Wins*, Rob Bell assures his readers that "nothing in this book hasn't been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me." That is true enough. But the tragedy is that those who did teach, suggest, or celebrate such things were those with whom no friend of the Gospel should want company. In this new book, Rob Bell takes his stand with those who have tried to rescue Christianity from itself. This is a massive tragedy by any measure.

The problem begins even with the book's title. The message of the Gospel is not merely that love wins — it is that Jesus saves.

Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (HarperOne, 2011).

Other works referenced: Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

See also:

R. Albert Mohler Jr., "[Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens](#)," January 26, 2010.

Denny Burk, "[Revising Hell into the Heterodox Mainstream](#)," March 15, 2011.

Russell D. Moore, "[The Blood-Drained Gospel of Rob Bell](#)," March 15, 2011.

Kevin DeYoung, "[God is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of Love Wins](#)," March 14, 2011.

Ligon Duncan, "[Speaking Seriously and Sensitive about Hell to the Sons of this Age and the Next](#)," March 15, 2011.

