

Love Wins

An Assessment of Rob Bell's Book

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Introduction

From the Book Jacket

“God loves us.

God offers us everlasting life by grace,
freely, through no merit on our part.

Unless you do not respond the right way.
Then God will torture you forever in hell.”

Huh?

Introduction

"Jesus' story has been hijacked ..." vii

"... 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...." viii

Introduction

"Jesus' story has been hijacked ..." vii

"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." viii

Introduction

"Jesus' story has been hijacked ..." vii

Comment: "few" and "many"

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"Jesus' story has been hijacked ..." vii

Comment: "few" and "many"

"east ... west ... north ... south"

Introduction

"Jesus' story has been hijacked ..." vii

Comment: "few" and "many"

"east ... west ... north ... south"

"ransom for many"

Introduction

Bell: Nothing novel or unorthodox

"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." 109

Introduction

Nothing Novel or Unorthodox

Comment: Origen / Clement of Alexandria
Gregory of Nyssa
Jerome / Basil / Augustine / Luther
Council of Constantinople 543 AD

Bell on The Character of God

Bell on The Character of God

Bell: God is Love (period)

The Character of God

Bell: God is Love (period)

"Sometimes the reason people have a problem accepting 'the gospel' is that they sense that the God lurking behind Jesus isn't safe, loving, or good." 175

The Character of God

Bell: God is Love (period)

“We do ourselves great harm when we confuse the very essence of God, which is love, with the very real consequences of rejecting and resisting that love, which creates what we call hell.” 177

The Character of God

Bell: God is Love (period)

“We do ourselves great harm when we confuse the very essence of God, which is love, with the very real consequences of rejecting and resisting that love, which creates what we call hell.” 177

“... we create hell whenever we fail to trust God’s retelling of our story.” 175

Bell's Arguments from the Character of God

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- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.

“Loving one moment, vicious the next. Kind and compassionate, only to become cruel and relentless in the blink of an eye.

Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die?” 174

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.

"The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn't give up until everything that was lost is found. This God simply doesn't give up. Ever." 101

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.
- Large numbers receiving such torment conflicts with God's power and love.

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"Will everybody be given a new heart, or only a limited number of people?"

Will God, in the end settle, saying: Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure"? 103

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.
- Large numbers receiving such torment conflicts with God's power and love.

“Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God's unrelenting, infinite, expansive love?” 109

Arguments from the Character of God

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- This conflicts with God's justice.

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.
- Large numbers receiving such torment conflicts with God's power and love.
- **This conflicts with God's justice.**

"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?" 102

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.
- Large numbers receiving such torment conflicts with God's power and greatness.
- This conflicts with God's justice.
- **This conflicts with God's glory.**

Arguments from the Character of God

- Sending people to unending torment would be the opposite of love.
- Large numbers receiving such torment conflicts with God's power and greatness.
 - This conflicts with God's justice.
 - This conflicts with God's glory.

“Central to their trust [Origen, etc.] that all would be reconciled was the belief that untold masses of people suffering forever doesn't bring God glory. Restoration brings God's glory...” 108

Response

- The character of God is crucial

Response

- The character of God is crucial
- We must depend on what God has revealed

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Q: “Why do you believe in hell?”

Response

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Q: “Why do you believe in hell?”

A: “*I believe in hell for the same reason I believe in heaven.*”

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- God's character is richer than love-period

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“God is love”

Response

- The character of God is crucial
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- God's character is richer than love-period
 - “God is love” “God is light”

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- God's character is richer than love-period

“God is love” “God is light”

God is just God is holy

Response

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- We must depend on what God has revealed
- God's character is richer than love-period
- On Bell's view, there is no divine retribution

Response

“... there’s a point to what the prophet interprets and understands to be God’s ‘anger and wrath.’ It’s to teach the people, to correct them, to produce something new in them.” 85

Jer. 5:3 You crushed them, but they refused correction.

Response

Q: But is the wrath of God, divine judgment, only for corrective/redemptive purpose?

Response

Q: But is the wrath of God, divine judgment, only for corrective/redemptive purpose?

C.S. Lewis: “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment”

Response

Bell says he believes in a God of justice, of judgment and of anger against injustice.

Response

"God says no to injustice. God says, 'Never again' to the oppressors who prey on the weak and vulnerable. ...

Response

"God says no to injustice. God says, 'Never again' to the oppressors who prey on the weak and vulnerable. ...

It is important to remember that we hear people say they can't believe in a 'God of judgment.'

Yes, they can. Often we think of little else. Every oil spill, every report of another woman sexually assaulted, every news report that another political leader has silenced the opposition through torture, imprisonment and execution....

We crave judgment, we long for it, we thirst for it. Bring it, unleash it, as the prophet Amos says, 'Let justice roll on like a river.' (Amos 5:24) ...

Response

The same with the word 'anger.'

...

And that is the promise of the prophets in the age to come: God acts. Decisively. On behalf of everybody who's ever been stepped on by the machine, exploited, abuse, forgotten, or mistreated. God puts an end to it. God says, 'Enough.'" 37-39

Response

Problem: Justice is more than just bringing a halt to injustice.

Justice is getting what one deserves.

Response

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Justice is getting what one deserves.

For Bell: Justice is:

- (a) allowing negative natural consequences
- (b) calling a halt to wickedness on the last day
- (c) excluding (for a time) some from the new creation

Response

Problem: Justice is more than just bringing a halt to injustice.

Justice is getting what one deserves.

For Bell: Justice is:

- (a) allowing negative natural consequences
- (b) calling a halt to wickedness on the last day
- (c) excluding (for a time) some from the new creation

But Bell rejects the idea of divine punishment as a just consequence for sin, either in this life or after.

Response

The biblical teaching of holiness and wrath against all that is evil:

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The “wrath of God poured out” is
more than just natural consequences
more than eventually declaring “Enough!”

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The “wrath of God poured out” is more than just natural consequences more than eventually declaring “Enough!”

“It is mine to avenge; I will repay.”

Deut. 32:35 (Rom 12:19; Heb. 10:30)

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31)

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- Bell makes virtually no mention of God's holiness

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“consuming fire”

(Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Heb. 12:29)

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- Finite Sin / Infinite Punishment?

Response

Finite Sin / Infinite Punishment?

Q: Is redemption from hell possible?

Response

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A₁: Biblical emphasis on finality

Response

Finite Sin / Infinite Punishment?

Q: Is redemption from hell possible?

A₁: Biblical emphasis on finality

A₂: Possible explanation: Removal of “common grace”

Response

Finite Sin / Infinite Punishment?

Q: Is redemption from hell possible?

A₁: Biblical emphasis on finality

A₂: Possible explanation: Removal of “common grace”

[Note on annihilationism]

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- For Bell there is no divine retribution
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- The Compatibility of love and judgment

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross

Bell: "Many have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God.

Let's be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is our rescuer."

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross

Rom. 5:9 Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be *saved from God's wrath through him*.

Rom. 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up *wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath*, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross

Eph. 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Col. 3:5-6 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross
- Mother / Judge analogy

Response

The Compatibility of love and judgment

- The Cross
- Mother / Judge analogy
- The glory of God in the Bible
 - the glory of the king bringing down the wicked
 - the glory of the merciful father

Response

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- We must depend on what God has revealed
- God's character is richer than love-period
- For Bell there is no divine retribution
- Bell makes no mention of God's holiness
- Finite Sin / Infinite Punishment?
- The Compatibility of love and judgment
- On the torment in hell

Response

On the torment in hell

- What is the source?

Response

On the torment in hell

- What is the source?
 - God not said to be the tormentor

Response

On the torment in hell

- What is the source?
 - God not said to be the tormentor
(even though in God's wrath against all evil
people are cast into hell)

Response

On the torment in hell

- What is the source?
 - God not said to be the tormentor
 - Physical or spiritual?

Response

On the torment in hell

- What is the source?
 - God not said to be the tormentor
 - Physical or spiritual?
- “Fire” “Darkness”

Response

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- We must depend on what God has revealed
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- The Compatibility of love and judgment
- On the torment in hell
- On the number in hell

Response

On the number in hell

- Depends on the depth of the fall

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Matt. 19:17 “There is only One who is good.”

Rom. 3:10 (Ps 14:3) “There is none righteous;
not even one.”

Response

On the number in hell

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 - Matt. 19:17 “There is only One who is good.”
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- Salvation: not a matter of relative goodness or piety, but union with the only righteous one

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 - Matt. 19:17 “There is only One who is good.”
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- Salvation: not a matter of relative goodness or piety, but union with the only righteous one
- Two-child analogy

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

From the Old Testament

- Blessing to the nations
- Restoration / Including gathering the nations

From the teaching of Jesus

- Love for the world / Came to save ... not condemn
- Forgiving enemies
- Will draw all people to himself
- Renewal of all things

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

From the teaching of Paul:

- Statements speaking of “all” being saved
- Statements of all things being united in Christ
- “every knee will bow, every tongue confess”

Re-interpreting Jesus' teaching on hell:

- Jesus' use of “*gehenna*”
- Jesus' teaching about judgment (w/out “*gehenna*”)

From the book of Revelation

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Jesus:

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world ... For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

John 12:32 “... when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

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John 12:32 “... when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

But note context:

John 3:16b, 18 “... that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ... 18 *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

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John 12:32 "... when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

But note context:

John 12:35-36 Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light "

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Jesus:

Matt. 19:28 “the renewal of all things”

John 10:16 “I have other sheep that are not of this fold”

Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Jesus:

Matt. 19:28 “the renewal of all things”

John 10:16 “I have other sheep that are not of this fold”

Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Comment:

- Renewal: The Old Testament hope
- Other sheep: Not everyone (Parable: Sheep / Goats)
- Forgive them: Not a proclamation forgiveness for all sins

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Paul:

Rom. 5:18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

1 Cor. 15:22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Ephesians 1:8-10 ... the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Bell's Case for Universalism from the Bible

Paul:

Rom. 14:11-12 It is written, “*As I live,*’ says the Lord, *‘every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’*” (Isa. 45:23) So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

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Comment:

- Imagery is that of the a victorious conqueror
Every knee will bow:
Some voluntarily / Some involuntarily

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Paul:

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Comment:

- Imagery is that of the a victorious conqueror
Every knee will bow:
Some voluntarily / Some involuntarily
- “Giving an account” implies a day of reckoning
— not necessarily positive

Bell on Jesus' Teaching

Jesus:

John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Bell:

"This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make.

What he doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims the whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him." 155

Bell on Jesus' Teaching

Jesus:

John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Bell:

“the all-embracing, saving love of this particular Jesus will of course include all sorts of unexpected people ... Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists ...” 155

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Note regarding *inclusivism*:

Bell on Jesus' Teaching

Jesus:

John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Note regarding *inclusivism*:

- Only one path to God: Jesus
- But many saved apart from conscious faith in Jesus

Bell on Jesus' Teaching

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John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Note regarding *inclusivism*:

- Only one path to God: Jesus
- But many saved apart from conscious faith in Jesus

-
- A biblical case for some being saved

(Ninevah / Rom. 2)

- But, universal tendency not to trust God (Rom. 3)
- Biblical Theme: Salvation through faith in Christ

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
 - Just referring to the garbage dump (as vivid language to condemn bad actions/attitudes)

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
 - Just referring to the garbage dump (as vivid hyperbole)
- “Jesus’ teaching about hell [is] a volatile mixture of images, pictures and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity..” 75

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)

But consider:

Matt. 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

Bell on Jesus on Hell

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- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)

But consider:

Matt. 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

Matt. 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Bell on Jesus on Hell

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- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching about hell but not using the word *gehenna*

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah

Ezek 16:53 I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters ...

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah

Mt. 11:23 “It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you.”

Bell on Jesus on Hell

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- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
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Mt. 11:23 “It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you.”

“There’s still hope?”

And if there’s hope for Sodom and Gomorrah, what does that say about other Sodoms and Gomorrahs.” 84-85

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah

Comment:

- Ezekiel is likely using “Sodom” as is “Babylon” elsewhere

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah

Comment:

- Ezeziel is likely using “Sodom” as is “Babylon” elsewhere
- Even if the city rises again — the dead aren’t raised

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah
 - “Eternal punishment” (parable of sheep and goats)

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah
 - “Eternal punishment” (parable of sheep and goats)
Mt. 25:46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life”

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah
 - “Eternal punishment” (parable of sheep and goats)
Mt. 25:46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life”
Bell: “the phrase can mean ‘a period of pruning’ or ‘a time of trimming,’ or an intense experience of correction” 91

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Bell

- Jesus teaching about *gehenna* (hell)
- Jesus teaching seemingly about hell but not using the word *gehenna*
 - Sodom and Gomorrah
 - “Eternal punishment”
 - Urgency

Bell on Jesus on Hell

“This invitation to trust ... is infinitely urgent. Jesus told a number of stories about this urgency in which things did not turn out well for the people involved. ... Jesus tells these stories to wake us up to the timeless truth that history moves forward While we continually find grace waiting to pick us up ... after we have fallen, there are realities to our choices. While we may get other opportunities, we won't get the one right in front of us again.... Jesus reminds us ... that our choices matter more than we can imagine.” 196-197

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Comment:

Finality is stressed

Bell on Jesus on Hell

Comment:

Finality is stressed

Mt 8:11-12 “I say that many will come from east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Conclusion

Love does win!

Conclusion

Love does win!

Through the vanquishing of all evil (hell)
and

Through the restoration of people from all
nations in God's new creation

Conclusion

“If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option.... If we want nothing to do with love, we are given a reality free from love.” 117

"When it comes to people then—the who of heaven—what Jesus does again and again is warn us against rash judgments about who's in and who's out." 54

Conclusion

"No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever." 86