

A Review and Commentary on Rob Bell's Book

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Recently, I weighed in on the controversy surrounding Rob Bell's new release, Love Wins. Some colleagues had sent me an article about his book from Time Magazine. I read the article with great surprise. Given Rob Bell's stature as a renowned author and pastor I decided to purchase the book and see firsthand what the hubbub is about. I read it three times before writing this review to ensure I clearly understood each chapter in its context. In my first reading, I immediately saw the concern others have, and I share those concerns as a pastor and a theologian. Rob Bell appears to have sided with the viewpoint of *Evangelical Inclusivism*. This is not a new viewpoint, but has been around a long time and held by great minds and theologians who are driven in their views by compassion for the lost. I will make an objective attempt at summarizing each chapter with Rob's words and thoughts [not always verbatim] and following up each summary with a comment.



Preface — Millions of Us

Summary: Rob states there are millions of Christians, like him, who believe the Jesus story has been hijacked and wrongly interpreted by hard-core fundamentalism. He believes the central plot of the gospel is “God so loved the world,” but this theme has been lost and needs to be reclaimed. Rob says that the Jesus story of “love and reconciliation” has been replaced with the stomach-churning message of eternal damnation—“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 (pg. viii).” Rob claims that he and millions of others do not want to be a part of that type of thinking. It is a message that repels people from God, rather than toward God. Rob believes the message about hell has become the central message of the church and subverts the more important message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy.

Comment: I like Rob Bell and have enjoyed his creative ways of communicating the gospel, particularly through his NOOMA videos. I also liked his teaching, In the Dust of the Rabbi, which truly inspired me as a life-long disciple. I am fully aware of Rob's broad influence among evangelicals, and especially young adults. But I am concerned that he's taken this position and the consequences his stance might present for the emerging generation. I have always believed the doctrine of a literal hell to be a fundamental truth in historic, orthodox Christianity. So as a shepherd, a teacher, and a defender of the faith, I feel I must weigh in on this. The preface launches us into Rob Bell's prime objective for the book—to challenge what he perceives to be the status quo of a misguided gospel message (turn or burn—heaven or hell) in the church.

Chapter 1 — What About The Flat Tire?

On the first page of this chapter, Rob poses questions about whether Ghandi is in hell or not. He doesn't say whether it's true, but he presents the questions as if he doubts it is true. This is the

first of approximately 113 similar questions he asks in this chapter, questions that appear to challenge status-quo statements of orthodox Christianity on the subject of eternal damnation and the afterlife. Here are some examples [though not verbatim]: If God created millions of people over thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish, can he do this, can he allow this, and still claim to be God? Does he really punish people for eternity, for things they did in their few short years? Is that the Christian message? No hope after death if you're an atheist or a non-believer? Is God limited to a short span of opportunity to get the gospel message through in time and, if not, then that's just unfortunate? Is the message of the gospel only about whether someone goes to heaven or hell? What about those who prayed the prayer for salvation, but live like the devil? What about those who haven't accepted God through the right formula, yet live like Christ? It all boils down to how you respond to Jesus, but which Jesus? If our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on and rests in the hands of others bringing the gospel message, what happens when the missionary gets a flat tire and fails to bring it? If salvation is not of works, but requires us to accept, confess, and believe—aren't those verbs which are *actions*, something we *do* to be saved? Isn't that a contradiction when Christians claim you don't have to *do* anything to be saved?

Rob then goes on from here to present 20 scripture references that include stories to add more questions to the questions he's asked. Fourteen times he uses the phrase, "*and this raises another question.*" So the whole of the first chapter is a chapter of questions about heaven, hell, the afterlife, salvation, believing, judgment, who God is and what is he like, and how does Jesus fit into any of it—that is, if it's the right Jesus?

Comment: This chapter can best be likened to a challenger in the boxing ring with the champion title holder. The challenger approaches the first round with a display of fancy footwork, and a flurry of jabs and punches at the air. The champ wonders when the guy will start to fight so he can see how hard those punches are. But it's merely an attempt to intimidate the champ. Rob's questions can also be likened to a boxer in training at a speed bag with an uninterrupted flurry of rhythmic punches, or in the case of this first chapter, a flurry of 113 questions. Perhaps these questions are meant to put us off balance and see if our title-holding theology (on a literal hell) is up to the task of withstanding the challenger (no literal hell). And since no punch has been landed yet, no comment from me is necessary. I can assure you; however, that Rob is merely warming up.

Chapter 2 — Here Is The New There

Summary: The general consensus of Christians about heaven is that it's *somewhere else*. A place we go *to*. So what will it be like? Who will be there? Who won't be there? Will we recognize people? Will we see our entire family, or only those who have *made* it? Rob addresses the word "age" in its Greek origin of *aion*, which means "a period or era of time." He says it doesn't mean forever as we think of forever. Therefore, according to Jesus, there is this age (*aion*) we live in now, and a coming age—the world to come—eternal life. Rob believes heaven can be on earth now, through the choices we make, in how we live, and it will also be on earth in the coming age. Life in the coming age will be earth-like, not just people on clouds with white robes and harps. It will be a renewed world where evil cannot survive. The day of the Lord will be the day when God says "enough" to anything that threatens the peace he intends for the world. Heaven is that

realm where things are as God intends them to be. And the day will come when heaven and earth will be the same place—God’s dwelling among the people. He also believes that the future age of heaven on earth can be dragged into the present. Meaning we can prepare to be, and act now, like we’ll be and act in the age to come. “Your [God’s] will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus teaches us to pursue heaven’s life now, plus anticipate the day when heaven and earth become one. Eschatology and ethics needs to be brought into balance. Eschatology shapes our ethics, and ethics shapes how we live. In heaven, we reign with God. Reign—means to actively participate in the ordering of creation. This is what we’re called to do here, in the present age. Heaven not only comforts, it also confronts our true intentions. That which we do spiritually for carnal reasons will be burned up. Heaven brings hope and within that hope is judgment. Rob also believes that heaven is not about who gets in and who doesn’t. It’s more about the transformation of our character and nature. Heaven is a place to start over, where every choice is good for the earth and the world. The confrontational flames of heaven will lead us to the surprise of heaven. Heavenly life can be experienced now—but in the coming age we’ll have a different body, a heavenly one. It will be a place where the intensity of experience will transcend time. Eternal life, however, is less about time and more about the quality of life we live in now in connection to God. Eternal life doesn’t start when we die, it starts now. In the meantime, however, there’s something in the way called “flesh” which inhibits our ability to fully experience all possibilities of heaven on earth today. God’s peace, joy, and love that we’ll experience in the age to come are available to us now, exactly as we are, in this present age.

Comment: I enjoyed this chapter and agreed with 90% of it. I’ve taught many of these things for years and have written a book on the coming age called, *In the Light of Eternity—When Heaven Joins Earth*. However, there is a subtle caveat behind the obvious things we can agree with in this chapter—one that will be revealed in the next chapter on Hell.

Chapter 3 – Hell

Summary: The T-shirt message, “Turn or Burn!” Rob says, just about sums up the Christian story presented to the lost. Fire, torment, endless anguish and eternal agony. Trust God, accept Jesus, confess, repent, and everything will go well—but if you don’t, that’s just unfortunate because hell awaits you. Is that what Jesus really taught? Rob sees it differently. He then proceeds to show every verse in the Bible that uses the word “hell.” Other words like Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, Tartarus, and the Abyss—all refer to hell. Rob says he does believe in a literal hell (top of pg. 71), but maybe not in the conventional sense. He wonders about the horrifying images of hell depicted beneath the earth’s crust. Is that picture accurate? From there, Rob lists stories of hell being experienced by “the living” on earth—that is, our own hell on earth as victims, or our own hell on earth created by choices we’ve made. We have been given a free will by God to experience either heaven on earth, or hell on earth. In his stories about hell Jesus used strong imagery for a reason—to describe very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are free to do. Jesus used this type of hyperbole to cause us to question what he was so worked up about. Rob believes the strong language of Jesus was metaphorical and surreal, but maybe not referring to something real—like a real, fiery hell beneath the earth’s crust. Hell is a real experience on earth, but maybe not a real place of eternal torment. For example, the story Jesus told about Lazarus and the rich man, for

example, Rob believes was meant to address the issue of social injustice and classism of the day to his audience. The chasm was the rich man's heart that had rejected and ignored Lazarus outside his gate. He failed to love his neighbor as himself. This was a nuanced story, not a real event and not a real place. What Jesus described wasn't a real place, but imagery to demonstrate how horrific our lives can be through our choices. Jesus came to bring about a new social order, a social equality. The rich man represents the audience and the beggar represents the Lazarus' we ignore outside our gates. People most concerned about others going to hell seem less concerned with the individual hells on earth; the communal, societal hells. When Jesus warns of coming wrath and judgment, it was about practical and political warnings. Don't do what you're doing because the Romans will crush you. His warnings of coming wrath weren't about someday, somewhere else. Jesus didn't use hell hyperbole for the purpose of compelling heathens to believe in God and avoid hell—he was warning the Jews about straying from their roots and calling to show God's love to the world. Rob says there is *hope* for Sodom and Gomorrah and all other Sodoms and Gomorrahs because there will be a movement from punishment to new life. 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. Rob then goes on from this statement to quote 14 Old Testament scriptures about restoration, and bringing people home to God. His bottom line: hell is the loaded, volatile word to describe real consequences on earth when we reject the good, true and beautiful life that God has for us. Hell is the needed word to describe the evil within our hearts that will lead to social collapse and chaos when we fail to live in God's world God's way.

Comment: Rob Bell seems to have a problem with the idea of a literal, fiery hell and eternal torment for people who reject Jesus. In his mind Jesus does not use "hell" in a literal sense, but as a tool of imagery to assist people in grasping the brevity of their choices and the consequences they bring about for themselves—on earth—in this life. "Hell," therefore, is more of a code word than a literal place with demons and fire and worms and Satan. He implies there's a "second chance" [after we die] in the next life because the hell we create for ourselves is the hell we receive while we live here, but not necessarily a hell we're sent to for eternal torment. Rob doesn't apply adequate *exegesis* (critical analysis through tools of interpretation) in the scriptures he uses to make his case. He tends to take things out of context and uses more application than literal interpretation. Some of what he concludes is based more on conjecture than the purest form of interpreting scripture. To tackle orthodox Christian doctrine on hell requires a more scholarly approach if it's going to hold up. It requires more than wanting it to be different because you don't like how it looks to the lost, and how they see God. When we begin to let the lost determine how we interpret the scriptures, and then present it to them in a more palatable way, the argument becomes a slippery slope. I believe much of the application Rob uses in this chapter has merit, however, application should never determine theology, theology determines the application.

Chapter 4 — Does God Get What God Wants?

Summary: Church websites and signs that state the lost will be eternally punished in hell contradict the affirmations and goodness of God they talk about in the church. They are parallel claims—God is creator, powerful, mighty, and in control—yet billions of people will spend

eternity in hell, apart from their Creator. God wants all people to be saved, but fails to pull off that desire. In other words, God doesn't get what he wants. He fails to save all his creation. In the end, he'll have to settle with giving it his best shot and say, "You can't always get what you want." Rob says that some church reformers and others believed there must be some kind of "second chance" for those who don't believe in Jesus in this lifetime. Or given enough time, everybody will turn to God. 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. Rob quotes New Testament scriptures to affirm this concept that all things will be renewed and restored to God. He takes quotes from early church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius, Jerome, Basil, and Augustine to support this idea. He asserts that untold masses of people, suffering forever, does not bring God glory. Restoration brings God glory, eternal torment does not. Reconciliation does, endless anguish does not. Ever since the first church, Christian tradition [through a number of people] insists that hell is not forever, love wins in the end, and all will be reconciled to God. Many people don't follow Jesus today because of the uncomfortable parts about hell and torment. A story of eternal misery isn't a very good story. God's love and mercy are bigger, stronger, and more compelling than that. The better story is about enjoying God's good world together, with no disgrace or shame, justice being served, and all wrongs being made right. In this chapter, Rob approaches Revelation as a letter from Pastor John to his congregation during oppressive times under Roman persecution. It is written in apocalyptic language to show how God runs the world and how long he would let this injustice continue. The letter was meant to paint a picture of how God acts decisively to restrain evil and conquer all who trample on the innocent and the good. In the end, wrongs are righted and people are held accountable. But the letter does not end with blood and violence; it ends with a new city, healed nations, peace on earth, and no more tears. We cannot resolutely answer the questions about whether everybody will be saved in the end, or perish apart from God eternally. No one has been there and returned with hard, empirical evidence. But we can ask a better question, "Do we all get what we want?" Yes. God is that loving. We can have heaven, or hell [Rob's definition of hell]—it's our choice. God says we can have what we want because "love wins."

Comment: There are clearer indications in this chapter that Rob does see a "second chance" in the coming age for those who die without God. Ultimately, God's love wins out, and peoples of all races are ultimately swept into salvation in an eternal life of peace. The lost [God's creation bearing his image] will not be able to resist God's love forever. They will eventually be overwhelmed by his love and make a freewill choice to come home to Papa. This is probably where people perceive Rob as espousing a doctrine of "universalism." But Rob isn't a Universalist by its purest definition, and he will deny that he is. Though he does play around the edge of universalism in this book, the qualifier that keeps him out of that briar patch will be found in the next chapter. Rob uses scriptures (sometimes out of context), plus quotes from early church fathers, to support these ideas he's introduced. To strengthen his case, he sees the book of Revelation more as a flannel graph of images, written to encourage an alleged congregation he pastored on the Isle of Patmos. There is no mention of that in Revelation. If I'm reading between the lines correctly, Rob doesn't see Revelation as a series of literal judgments, or having a real lake of fire—maybe because it would challenge his views on eternal damnation (as in Revelation 20). It seems to me that Rob subjectively tends to use application more than

exegesis (critical analysis) to trump theology. He also makes emphatic claims and statements about what church tradition and the early church fathers (like him) really believed about the afterlife [including a second chance]. Yet, without references for us to check his sources. I find conjecture in his conclusions. As in his previous chapters, there's a push at the church to become more politically correct in the language we use to win the lost.

Chapter 5 – Dying To Live

Summary: Rob emphasizes the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice that thoroughly pleased the only God who ever mattered. Through the cross, God reconciled “all things” unto himself. Not only was it the end of sacrifices, but also it paid the price of sins for all sinners. We have redemption through Christ's blood. Jesus is where the life is. He conquered death and his followers had experienced him after his death. Death gave way to life. Death and rebirth are as old as the world. But it becomes clearer through the life of Jesus and his resurrection event. His death that brought life is for everybody. It is a salvation to all people—life for all—death for the sins of the whole world, for all things and people in heaven and on earth. If you die, you'll be reborn. The cross is a reminder, a sign, a glimpse, an icon that allows us to tap into our deepest longings to be part of a new creation.

Comment: From how it looks on the surface, the things Rob brings out in this chapter aren't hard to agree with. However, if taken in context with the previous chapters, I see a belief emerging that “all” will be saved—*not* through other religions, but through Jesus. All will be saved because the blood of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus that took place for all sins, all peoples, and all sinners, no matter how bad any of us were. Our judgment is here (or in the age to come), for our wrong choices, or present and future deeds. However, the cross was enough to give everyone—in this life or the afterlife—a fresh clean start, a new slate, an opportunity for a “second chance” to start over and be overwhelmed by God's love.

Pluralism teaches all religions, all faiths lead to God's salvation. Rob doesn't believe that. He's more of a Christian Universalist which believes that all are “ultimately” saved through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is Christ, not religion, which will save all of humanity in the end. It is not a select few (Exclusivism) making it into heaven while billions upon billions of others suffer in eternal torment and punishment. All will be saved (Inclusivism) by the work of the cross. That is Rob's assumption. But it comes from a position of compassion for the lost, and the desire and motivation to provide a positive gospel message to the lost, not a cruel, harsh God. I believe Jesus died for all, so that all might be saved, but not all will choose to die in him to be saved and resurrected into eternal life. Hell was made for Satan and the fallen angels, not for man. But it is a literal place, not a metaphor. It has eternal consequences, not second chances. And Jesus spoke by knowledge of that spiritual realm, and came to set us free from hell on earth and under the earth.

Chapter 6 – There Are Rocks Everywhere

Summary: Rob uses the analogy of “rocks” to mean different ways that people meet God, encounter God, experience God, receive revelation about God, etc. For some, their “rocks” are

crazy God encounters. The rocks of others are simple, or odd encounters. There is energy, a spark and electricity that pulses through all of creation that keeps evolving, growing, and reproducing. To we who understand this, it is the Word of God, Jesus, who took on flesh and blood. The Word of God became man to reveal God to man. What God did through Christ he is doing today for everybody, every nation, every ethnic group, every tribe. The mystery revealed to the world is Jesus who is bigger than any one religion, and who transcends every religious label created to contain him, including Christianity. His role is to save, rescue, and redeem everything and everybody. He will draw “all” people to himself. He is for all people, but refuses to be owned by any one culture, denomination, church, theological system, or religion (including Christianity).

We can actually grow up in, read about, sing about, and know everything about Jesus, and never know *him*. Then one day, the right “rock” comes along, and the light turns on. We actually meet him. It could be while lost in another religion; it could be while lost in another cultural upbringing. The gospel will be proclaimed to every creature under heaven. Jesus alone is saving everybody—and then he leaves the doorway open to create all sorts of possibilities of finding him through odd “rocks” that don’t necessarily carry his name, or use the “Christianese” language we use. People come to Jesus in all sorts of ways. Sometimes people use his name; other times they don’t. Some may not use that name because it represents “another” Jesus, one with baggage they picked up through their own or others’ religious life experiences.

In conclusion, Rob admonishes us to carry the responsibility to be extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people’s eternal destinies and respect the vast, expansive, generous mystery that he is.

Comment: In this chapter, it appears that Rob is falling in line with what is called *Evangelical Inclusivism*. This means, according to Rob, that Jesus alone, and no other, is saving everybody—but he leaves the door wide open to create all sorts of possibilities to find him. Rob does not believe in Pluralism—that is, all religions and faiths lead to God; but it appears he believes that Jesus will win people to Himself through more than one formula, method or religion. Jesus is creative and diverse in how people discover him, and he is not bound to the cultural vehicle of Christendom to do that. At least that is what I perceive Rob implies in this chapter. He does, however, believe that *Exclusivism* (turn or burn for eternity) is too restrictive and confining for God’s vast means and ability to draw all people to Jesus through whatever means (rocks) necessary—in the same way he drew people to Jesus [the eternal Son of God] in the Old Testament when the name of Jesus was yet to be revealed. So I get what Rob is saying here. I understand his line of reasoning. I don’t disagree with it, but I also don’t agree with everything he says in this chapter in light of the underlying message. We all know that that there is no other name under heaven whereby men must be saved, other than in the name of Jesus. It isn’t religion, tradition, sacrament, or religious ceremony and the observance of it all—it’s Jesus who saves. Rob believes this. He doesn’t believe salvation can happen through other religions, but he does believe Jesus can speak and break into other religions or cultures to reveal himself as the way, the truth and the life—like he did with Saul, on the road to Damascus. That was Paul’s “rock” of revelation. With that I can agree. But I’m not a *Christian Universalist* or *Evangelical Inclusivist* like Rob, who appears to believe that all people who ever lived will be saved through

the cross, by their own free-will, either in this life, or when they get a second chance in the age to come.

Chapter 7 — The Good News is Better Than That

Summary: Rob begins this chapter with a woman who had no positive experiences with men. The term “love” was not a familiar concept to her. Every man she’d ever been with hit her. So she had her version or story of what men were like—all men. This opened Rob’s premise for Luke 15, the story of the man with two sons: a prodigal and the prodigal’s elder brother. Both sons had a different view, a different version, a different story about their dad. The prodigal was convinced he was unworthy to be a son after he squandered everything. The elder brother was convinced his father was cheap, unfair, and wouldn’t love him unless he towed the line, and was obedient to the “nth” degree. But the father had a different story to tell each of his sons. He retells their story of what they think he is into what he really thinks of his sons. He replaces their version of him with his version. He replaces their version of themselves with his version of them. The father redefines fairness as grace and generosity, which aren’t fair. The younger brother’s story is that he doesn’t deserve the party, whereas the older brother does deserve it, but never got one. Rob draws out from this that our version or story of heaven and hell are a different version than the Father’s. Hell for the older brother is refusing to trust the father’s version of the story, and miss out on the party—thus; he’s alone in his own hell. The father integrates his older son back in.

In a nutshell—Rob says that hell is our refusal to trust God’s retelling of our story—his version of our lives and his relationship to us. The gospel confronts our version of our story with God’s version of our story. First, we are loved—His version. God has made peace with us. But if we don’t trust God’s story and cling to our own [I’m unworthy, God hates me, I’m unlovely], then we create our own hell through our distorted view of God. So Rob implies that the “turn or burn for eternity” story is a wrong version. An earthly father who was like that in our world would be turned into the authorities as a child-abuser. God is not a father who loves one moment, and is vicious the next. Kind and compassionate one moment, only to become cruel and relentless in the blink of an eye. God is not someone who loves all the world, and then becomes different the moment you die. That kind of God is devastating. Psychologically crushing. Who can bear it? No one. How can that be true love—to love out of fear of a psychotic God who is loving one second and cruel the next. That’s not the gospel message, that’s not welcoming, and that won’t market well in spite of the coffee, good music, and compelling language. If that’s the God we present, then the God lurking behind Jesus isn’t safe, loving, or good. Who wants to have anything to do with that kind of God? But God’s very essence is love. He has no desire to inflict pain or agony on anyone. Resisting that love, rejecting that love creates what we call “hell.” So when the gospel is diminished to a question of whether or not a person will get into heaven, then that reduces the good news to a ticket, a way to get past the bouncer into the night club. The good news is better than that. Life has never been about just “getting in.” It’s about thriving in God’s good world. It’s about practicing and embodying the kind of attitudes and actions that will go on in the age to come. Rob believes we Christians are the jealous older brothers who resent others enjoying life while we slave and sacrifice to serve God. So we feel better by reminding ourselves that, someday, we’ll be in the party, and everyone else will be in hell where they get theirs. So the

story needs to be retold. The good news is better than that. God is not a slave driver, he is a deliverer—someone you naturally want to talk about, a God worth telling people about. Not a God who Jesus came to rescue us from. Our version of the gospel story has been institutionalized, draining people of life, because our God is angry, demanding, a slave-driver, with a religious system of sin-management where we work hard [like the elder son] to avoid the coming wrath that lurks behind every corner, thought and sin. Our version is a fear-based religion, but Jesus came to deliver us from that because his kind of love simply does away with fear. The elder son could not earn the father’s love. The father already loved him. All the father had belonged to his son already and could not be taken away. It was all there, waiting for him. And it’s always been there for us, if we trust God’s version of our story. Jesus forgives everyone, without their asking for it. It’s already been done on the cross. God isn’t waiting for us to clean up and get our act together—God has already done it. So let’s tell God’s version of the story—one of love, mercy, forgiveness, generosity; not eternal anguish, separation, hell, fire and brimstone. God’s good news is better than that.

Comment: Again, there is much I can agree with in this chapter. I like the basic applications Rob uses here about the father’s version of the story versus his two son’s version. This chapter pretty much clinches what Rob is after—a different gospel message than the “turn or burn” one. I believe this is the crux of the book, which is why he addresses the subject of hell and implies it may not really be literal after all, but just our version of the real gospel story, the real Jesus, the real Father God. It is true, that we can overkill on placing the emphasis on anger, wrath, eternal torment, and separation from God forever. But the caveat is one of imbalance. The Bible says and demonstrates that God is love, yes, but he is also revealed as just, holy, good, righteous, and unchangeable. These are his moral attributes. Rob doesn’t deny that God will judge our deeds, but the problem for me is that he emphasizes love without the other moral attributes of justice, holiness and righteousness that can’t allow sinful man to be anywhere near him, in this life or the next, apart from accepting the atoning work of the cross of Christ that cleanses us from all sin. Rob also leaves out the verse in Hebrews that challenges his theory of a “second chance” in the coming age—the verse that says, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Heb. 9:27 NIV).”

Chapter 8 – The End Is Here

Summary: Rob shares his experience of inviting Jesus into his heart one night when he was in elementary school. Something happened in him, something real, a defining moment in his life. But it didn’t stop there. Everyone is endlessly being invited to trust, accept, believe, embrace, and experience God’s love in an unfolding, dynamic way. Our story is being retold. Our history is being made new. We are invited to *become*—to be drawn into his love at it shapes us, transforms us to see everything differently. It is an urgent invitation, a moment in time we won’t pass again. So we must live like the end is near, now, today.

Comment: Nothing to disagree with here. An ending of love expressed from the author to us.

In conclusion: I’m not as alarmed about this book as I was initially. These are Rob’s convictions. He has a right to believe them. I don’t think it is serious enough to jeopardize

salvation, though he will give an account for it if it leads others astray. I understand why he joins millions of others who don't want to have any part of a gospel about eternal damnation, though I don't agree with it.

Rob Bell is wrong in some of his main theories about hell and the afterlife—but he's right in some other ways in their application of kingdom life principles. The Bible does not teach a "second chance" or ultimate salvation for everyone who ever lived so that God can get what he wants. Rob builds his case and position on that theory through conjecture, assumptions, misguided applications and subjective desires of how he would prefer to present God to the world. He likes the good news to be good news. Who doesn't? But for Rob to speak for every Christian and say that the majority of us are "Turn or Burners" is a gross misrepresentation. I believe most preachers of the full gospel endeavor to present a balanced message of the terror and the love of God. Most pastors of churches I've been familiar with preach predominately on the love of God.

I think the real picture is that churches preach less on hell and eternal damnation, less on the fear of God, and mostly on the love of God. When was the last time you heard a message on hell preached from the pulpit? When was the last time you heard eternal judgment preached from the pulpit? Hebrews actually lists eternal judgment as one of the seven fundamental principles of Christ, not love. Show me one place in the book of Acts where the word "love," or the "love of God" was mentioned in the presentation of the gospel. When did John the Baptist preach love and social utopia to the crowds in preparing them for Jesus? My greatest concern from this book, is that Rob's message removes the bite of the gospel, the urgency of the gospel, and ignores the warnings of scripture like Jude who said, "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them" (vs. 22-23 NIV).

Rob Bell touched lightly on eternal judgment in its entirety and did not present the complete picture of what scripture teaches about the coming age. Therefore, there is a measure of hiding the full and complete message with the subjective message of what makes Rob feel better in his presenting the God of the Bible to the world. He doesn't like all the pictures of God. Only the loving ones. He doesn't want God to appear like some psychotic angry father, only a merciful one. He argues his case without the complete picture of eternity and eternal judgment. He touches on scriptures and books that only support his points but doesn't address the other side. What he offers is a flurry of reasonable, logical questions to challenge the status quo.

Rob's questions are not all answered and actually created more questions. He never answers how this "second chance" works in the coming age. He never answers how long God will give to those to be overwhelmed by his love in the coming age. He never answers how justice actually is served for our crimes in this life. He never answers how the saints and the soon-to-be-one-day saints will live alongside each other in the coming age. He never answers if the one-day-I'll-be-a-Christ-follower becomes a Christian through works or a born-again experience. He never answers how we can receive an immortal body in the age to come, while we still have the tendencies of the sin nature to reject God until we wake up one day and get it. Did not Adam and Eve have an immortal body before they sinned? Yes. But when they rejected God's way, sin entered, and so did death—which removed their status of immortal bodies. So how does that work in the age to come? Will only the Christ-followers have immortal bodies and the others just keep dying until their next life, or the next life, or the next life finally gets so overwhelmed by

God's love that God can have his way where all peoples ever born will be saved? Isn't that sort of like re-incarnation? And if there isn't a literal hell, then what does God do with Satan and the fallen angels? How are they punished? Where are they sent? Or do they get a second chance, too, since they fall into the "all things restored" category. How is it fair when God, who created the angels, punishes the fallen angels with eternal torment and anguish, but not fallen humans? Doesn't that make God an unloving, unjust God to his other creatures?

So questions can be thrown out from both sides of the fence. Questions are good, if they're answered through correct *exegesis* (the process of critical analysis through applying the tools of hermeneutics to interpret scripture).

Questions are not good when they mishandle God's word through subjective desire, assumptions and conjecture. Not when *subjective* application trumps *objective* critical interpretation to produce one's theology. Deception, confusion, and more questions are the by-products of wrong interpretation.

I believe Rob's intentions in this book are sincere, with loving intent, and a desire to show us the way more perfectly in how we present the good news to the lost. I get it. I understand it. But you don't have to change the theology of hell to drive home that point.

It is a slippery slope to take the legs out from under the theology of a real hell with real eternal consequences described in the Bible.

It is a dangerous theory to make hell amount to no more than a perpetual slap on the hand from God until the second chance in the next life where love wins out, the last of everyone ever born are reborn, and God gets his way in the end.



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For a general definition of
Pluralism, Inclusivism, and
Exclusivism go to:

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org/pluralism.html>