

Q&A with Author
BOBBY CONWAY

Hell, Rob Bell & What Happens When People Die (eBook)

1) Bobby, can you give our listeners some background on this debate? Who is Rob Bell?

Rob Bell is a forty-year old mega church pastor, author and speaker. He is both a creative and an extremely gifted communicator. From all appearances he seems to have a great compassion for people; however, his compassion slips into Scriptural murkiness as he extends God's salvation plan beyond biblical borders. Rob's latest book, *Love Wins*, questions the church's traditional views of heaven and hell, and its release ignited a firestorm among the Christian blogosphere.

2) What do you see as the dangers of Rob's new book, *Love Wins*?

Bell's book will sadly prey on those ill-informed of God's Word. Bell presents a belief that runs contrary to Scripture—post-mortem salvation—the teaching that says people still have an opportunity for salvation *even after they die*. The Bible is clear, “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Instead of pleading with people to turn to Jesus Christ now, Bell relieves the tension. I fear many will think, “I'm glad I don't have to sweat my eternity no longer. I'll just live it up now and worry about God when I die.” Not only does this book pose a threat to non-believers, but I fear it will serve as a “mission-sapper,” whereby Christians no longer feel the urgent, pressing need to exclaim, “Today is the day of salvation.”

3) What is hell and how would you define it?

Hell is not the absence of God's presence. Rather, it's the presence of God's wrath. As I explain in my eBook, *Hell, Rob Bell, and What Happens When People Die*, I personally define hell as *an eternal place of conscious torment, whereby God pours out His wrath on Satan, His demons and unrepentant sinners*. The Bible is clear that all people are without excuse (Rom. 1:20). It's important to understand that people don't go to hell because God is a divine monster. Rather, they go there because they reject God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Here on earth even non-believers reap the benefits of God's *general* grace. God's general grace is His benevolence toward humanity that all people experience whether they realize it or not. In hell God's general grace will be gone without a trace. Absent. Nowhere to be found. Non-believers will experience the evil of their fallen natures without the Spirit's restraining power. Fallen humanity will be left to itself and it won't be pretty. The real torment will be the absence of God's pleasure and the presence of ones fallen nature being fully expressed without the aid of God's protective power.

4) What has been the orthodox view of hell through church history? To your knowledge, have there been variations on this?

There have certainly been variations, but not all are *accepted* within orthodoxy. Origen who lived in the late second to mid-third century AD is considered by many to be the father of universalism. This belief, that everyone will be saved, was not accepted within orthodoxy and Origen was later deemed a heretic subsequent to his death.

The accepted view through the ages is that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment. Scholars have disagreed and continue to disagree on what we mean by “torment.” Some believe Jesus was speaking literally when he referred to fire, darkness, gnashing of teeth, etc. Others believe these words and phrases are mere metaphors to describe a literal reality—a reality that may be worse than the descriptions themselves. Both of these views affirm that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment. The difference is

that the strict literalist claims to know the nature of hell more clearly (i.e. fire, darkness, etc.) than the person who holds to a metaphorical view.

The annihilationist view also holds that hell is a place of conscious torment, but doesn't believe hell is an *eternal* place of conscious torment. Those who adhere to this position believe that once non-believers die, they will suffer in hell *for a season* and then like an ice cube eventually melt away after they've been justly punished.

Of all of these positions universalism is the weakest biblically and has been clearly rejected within orthodoxy. The literal and metaphorical views, which both posit a literal eternal hell, have been clearly accepted within the church, but many still debate the veracity of annihilationism. Biblically speaking, annihilationism is more supportable than universalism because annihilationism doesn't offer the hope of post-mortem salvation.

5) There's been lots of talk about Rob Bell being a universalist. Is he? If not, how would you describe his position of hell?

Many have labeled Bell a universalist. I however, do not believe he is. He has clearly denied the claim, even when asked point blank, "Are you a universalist?" There are many shades of universalism. To name a few, certain Christian universalists believe everyone will be saved through Jesus Christ alone. Other universalists believe everyone will be saved regardless of their beliefs. Concerning Bell's belief I would describe him as a "post-mortem, nuanced-purgatorial inclusivist." In my book I devote an entire chapter called, "A Name For It" that sorts out this definition. Let me try to unpack it a bit here for you.

By "post-mortem" I simply mean that he believes people can be saved post-death. By "nuanced-purgatorial" I'm not implying technical purgatory according to the strict tradition of Roman Catholicism; rather his purgatory is more nuanced. People experience a hellish post-mortem reality, but it's not because they are experiencing God's divine wrath for their sins committed against a holy and righteous God. Rather, it's a season of consequence because they fail to receive God's love. Finally, I refer to Bell as an inclusivist instead of a universalist. A Christian inclusivist believes Christianity is true, but salvation is possible to those even outside of the Christian faith. They would maintain that all people who are included in God's salvation plan are saved because of Christ, even though they may not realize it. Bell clearly leaves room in his book in a few places for some to ultimately reject God. To Bell it goes against the laws of love for God to force himself upon anyone. Though he believes it's possible that everyone will be saved, he still leaves this loophole. To be fair to inclusivists, most do not believe in post-mortem salvation like Bell.

So, Rob's view is sort of a collage of beliefs weaved together in a mystic mosaic. I think the whole phrase needs to remain intact to properly understand where Bell is coming from. Again, I would describe him as a "post-mortem, nuanced-purgatorial inclusivist."

6) How is *Love Wins* a defining book in our culture right now?

Love Wins is bringing a deeper issue to the forefront that Christians must be ready to tackle in the upcoming years. That question is, "How do we understand the Bible?" We are living in a time where there is a growing struggle around this question. We cannot approach God's Word like a buffet whereby we pick and choose what we like and discard the rest. Nor can we tweak the Scriptures to fit our tastes. Rather, we must adjust to God's Word regardless of how difficult certain portions are to digest.

7) Do "good people" go to hell? Why?

We have to define what we mean by good. From God's perspective we are all sinners. From our own perspectives we may seem good. However, God doesn't judge us according to our own righteousness, but Christ's. The only person we will be compared to at the final judgment is Jesus. If we don't have His righteousness then we can't enter heaven. An imperfect person cannot go to a perfect place—otherwise it

wouldn't be perfect anymore. So God sent His perfect Son to die for all of our imperfections. When we believe on Jesus we are declared righteous. We are given His righteousness freely. That's grace.

8) How can Christians do a better job talking about the subject of hell?

I believe the most unloving thing a Christian can do is go mute on this subject. We owe it to our fellow human beings to talk about hell. However, we must change the tone. The world doesn't need to see a bunch of angry evangelicals shouting at the world, "Turn or burn!" The world needs to see compassionate, broken-hearted believers humbly pleading with non-believers to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We can also do a better job discussing hell, by learning what the Bible actually teaches about it. No other doctrine in all of Scripture will we find ourselves more tempted to allow our emotions to influence than the doctrine of hell. Our first question shouldn't be "how do I feel about hell?" but "what does the Bible teach about hell?"

9) How does someone become a Christian and know that they're saved?

There is no magic "sinner's prayer" in the Bible. We get saved by trusting in the righteousness of Christ; by believing that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and believing He was our ultimate substitute.

10) Tell our listeners a bit about your ministry, *The One Minute Apologist*.

The One Minute Apologist is a ministry I started to offer short, creative video answers to people's most disturbing and difficult questions. Many people are intimidated by the topic of apologetics. The One Minute Apologist offers quick answers to curious questions. The videos are designed for pastors, professors and small group leaders to use as teaching aids. They are also helpful for believers and non-believers who are looking to understand the Christian faith more clearly. Some people use the videos as witnessing tools. For more information go to [youtube.com/oneminuteapologist](https://www.youtube.com/oneminuteapologist).

11) Where can our listeners contact you or learn more about your ministry and the eBook *Hell, Rob Bell and What Happens When People Die?*

To learn more about Life Fellowship and the church where I pastor, visit LifeCharlotte.com. To order a copy of the book go to any major retailer, such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Christian Book Distributors or order directly at WaterbrookMultnomah.com.