

A Brief Structural Outline and Synopsis of Rob Bell's *Love Wins*

Purpose

To destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God... (2 Cor. 10:5)

Bibliographical Information

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

Structural Outline

I. Bell's Presuppositions (Preface)

- a. Summary – Bell rejects the particular and free nature of God's love, the historic and biblical understanding of final judgment, and understands the contents of his book as conforming to "orthodox Christian faith."
- b. On the Love of God – "First, I believe that Jesus' story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere." (Pg. vii)
- c. On Eternal Punishment – "A staggering number of people have 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 of anything better...This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear." (Pg. viii)
- d. On His Own View – "I haven't come up with a radical new teaching that's any kind of departure from what's been said an untold number of times. That's the beauty of the historic, orthodox Christian faith." (Pg. x)

II. Bell's Dilemma (Chapter 1 – What about the Flat Tire?)

- a. Summary – Essentially, this is a chapter of "questions" about the nature of God and the nature of conversion that serve as a segue to the main arguments of the book.
- b. Questions about the Nature of God – "Of all the billions for people who have ever lived, will only a select number make it to a better place and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God? Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their

few finite years of life?" (Pg. 2)

- c. Questions about the Exclusivity of Christ – "So when we hear that a certain person has 'rejected Christ,' we should first ask, 'Which Christ?' Many would respond to the question, 'Which Jesus?' by saying that we have to trust that God will bring those who authentically represent the real Jesus into people's lives to show them the transforming truths of Jesus' life and message. A passage from Romans 10 is often quoted to explain this trust: 'How can they hear without someone preaching to them?' And I wholeheartedly agree, but that raises another question. If our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on others bringing the message to us, teaching us, showing us – what happens if they don't do their part? What if the missionary gets a flat tire?" (Pg. 9)
- d. Questions about Conversion – "So what is it that saves you... Is it what you say, or who you are, or what you do, or what you say you're going to do, or who your friends are, or who you're married to, or whether you give birth to children? Or is it what questions you're asked? Or is it what questions you ask in return? Or is it whether you do what you're told and go into the city?" (Pgs. 13-17)

III. *Bell's Heaven (Chapter 2 – Here is the New There)*

- a. Summary – Bell argues that heaven is about the experience of (or participation in) the "age to come" in this "present age" as experienced by humans who are co-workers with God in the restoration of the world.
- b. On Heaven – "Heaven is both the peace, stillness, serenity, and calm that comes from having everything in its right place – that state in which nothing is required, needed, or missing – and the endless joy that comes from participating in the ongoing creation of the world." (Pg. 48) --- "When Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present eternal, intense, real experience of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come." (Pgs. 58-59)
- c. On Ethics – "How we think about heaven, then, directly affects how we understand what we do with our day and energies now, in this age.... Taking heaven seriously, then, means taking suffering seriously, now... Around a billion people in the world today do not have access to clean water. People will have access to clean water in the age to come, and so working for clean-water access for all is participating now in the life of the age to come." (Pgs. 44-45)
- d. On the Confrontation of Heaven (Emergent Purgatory) – "Some in this process will find that they spent their energies and efforts on things that won't be in heaven-on-earth. 'If it is burned up,' Paul writes, 'the builder will

suffer loss but yet will saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames... Flames in heaven... Jesus makes no promise that in the blink of an eye we will suddenly become totally different people who have vastly different tastes, attitudes, and perspectives. Paul makes it very clear that we will have our true selves revealed and that once the sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies are prohibited and removed, for some there simply won't be much left.... It is important, then, to keep in mind that heaven has the potential to be a kind of starting over. (Pgs. 49-50)

IV. ***Bell's Hell*** (Chapter 3 – Hell)

- a. Summary – Bell argues that hell is the experience and consequence of both the personal and impersonal rejection of love, grace, kindness, and humanity by people in this present age and the age to come.
- b. On a Literal Hell – "Do I believe in a literal hell? Of course... Have you ever sat with a woman while she talked about what it was like to be raped? How does a person describe what it's like to hear a five-year-old boy whose father just committed suicide ask, 'When is daddy coming home?' How does a person describe that unique look, that ravaged, empty stare you find in the eyes of a cocaine addict? I've seen what happen when people abandon all that is good and right and kind and humane." (Pg. 71)
- c. On Jesus' Teaching about Hell – "Some words are strong for a reason. We need those words to be that intense, loaded, complex, and offensive, because they need to reflect the realities that describe... And that's what we find Jesus teaching about hell – a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experience and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity." (Pgs. 72-73) --- "What we see in Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus is an affirmation that there are all kinds of hells, because there are all kinds of ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in the life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next... there is a hell now, and there is a hell later." (Pg. 79)
- d. On the Eternality of Hell – Using prophetic text from the Old Testament Bell universalizes the theme of restoration. (Pg. 85-88) Bell comments, "Failure, we see again and again, isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction." (Pg. 88) Furthermore, Bell uses 1 Timothy 1:18-20 (Hymenaeus and Alexander handed over to Satan) to substantiate the claim that hell is essentially for correction and reformation, claiming, "They will learn. They will grow. They will become better." (Pg. 89)

V. ***Bell's "God"*** (Chapter 4 – Does God Get What God Wants?)

- a. Summary – In this chapter, Bell suggest that it is possible that God's desire for the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:3-4) can be satisfied, yet it is without question that His love for humanity will constrain Him to grant them the absolute, libertarian ability and freedom to choose otherwise.
- b. On the Freedom of Man – "For there to be love, there has to be the option, both now and then, to not love. To turn the other way. To reject the love extended. To say no. Although God is powerful and mighty, when it comes to the human heart God has to play by the same rules we do. God has to respect our freedom to choose to the very end, even at the risk of the relationship itself. If at any point God overrides, co-opts, or hijacks the human heart, robbing us of our freedom to chose, then God has violated the fundamental essence of what love even is." (Pg. 103-104) --- "Love demands freedom. It always has, and it always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God's ways for us. We can have all the hell that we want." (Pg. 113) --- "Does God get what God wants? (It) is a good question, an interesting question, an important question that gives us much to discuss. But there is a better questions.... Do we get what we want? And the answer to that is a resounding, affirming, sure, and positive yes. Yes, we get what we want. God is that loving." (Pgs. 116-117)
- c. On Post-Mortem Conversion – "And then there are others who ask, if you get another chance after your die, why limit that chance to a one-off immediately after death? And so they expand the possibilities, trusting that there will be endless opportunities in and endless amount of time for people to say yes to God... As long as it takes, in other words... At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. 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." (Pg. 107)
- d. On the Glory of Judgment – "Central to their trust that all would be reconciled was that belief that untold masses of people suffering forever doesn't bring God glory. Restoration brings glory; eternal torment doesn't. Reconciliation brings God glory; endless anguish doesn't. Renewal and return cause God's greatness to shine through the universe; never-ending punishment doesn't." (Pg. 108) --- "Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn't a very good story... Everybody enjoying God's good world together with no disgrace or shame, justice being served, and all the wrongs being made right is a better story." (Pgs. 110-111)
- e. On the Satisfaction of God's Desire – "Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are question, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't, and so we

simply respect them, creating space for the freedom the love requires." (Pg. 115)

VI. *Bell's Cross* (Chapter 5 – Dying to Love)

- a. Summary – In this chapter, Bell explains the death of Christ as a multifarious¹ analogy of God's love and the resurrection of Christ as the inauguration of a movement toward the goal of universal restoration.
- b. On the Death of Christ – "What happened on the cross is like a defendant going free, a relationship being reconciled, something lost being redeemed, a battle being won, a final sacrifice being offered, so that no one ever has to offer another one again, an enemy being loved... To elevate one (of the above mentioned metaphors) over the other, to insist that there's a 'correct' or 'right' one, is to miss the brilliant, creative work these first Christians were doing when they used these images and metaphors. (Pgs. 128-129)
- c. On the Purpose of the Resurrection – "When Jesus is presented only as the answer that saves individuals from their sin and death, we run the risk of shrinking the Gospel down to something just for humans, when God has inaugurated a movement in Jesus' resurrection to renew, restore, and reconcile 'everything on earth or in heave' (Col. 1), just as God originally intended it." (Pg. 134)
- d. On the Personal Nature of the Resurrection – "When we say yes to God, when we open ourselves to Jesus' living, giving act on the cross, we enter in to a way of life. He is the source, the strength, the example and the assurance that this pattern of death and rebirth is the way into the only kind of life that actually sustains and inspires." (Pgs. 135-136)

VII. *Bell's "Christ"* (Chapter 6 – *There Are Rocks Everywhere*)

- a. Summary – In this chapter, Bell essentially argues for an Inclusivistic view of salvation that claims that everyone who is ultimately saved is saved through Jesus whether they realize it or not.
- b. On John 14:6 – "John remember Jesus saying, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' 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 that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and

¹ Having many varied parts or aspects

restore the world is happening through him." (Pg. 154)

- c. On the Exclusivity and Inclusivity of Jesus – "What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe. He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation. (Pg. 155)
- d. On the Judgment of Others – "It is our responsibility to be extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people's eternal destinies. As Jesus says, he 'did not come to judge the world, but to save the world' (John 12). We can name Jesus, orient our lives around him, and celebrate him as the way, the truth, and the life, and at the same time respect the vast, expansive, generous mystery that he is." (Pg. 160)

VIII. *Bell's "Gospel"* (Chapter 7 – *The Good New is Better Than That*)

- a. Summary – In this chapter, Bell describes the gospel as the invitation to the new life that God extends to all who freely chose to partake.
- b. On the Gospel – "What the gospel does is confront our version of our story with God's version of our story." (Pg. 171) --- "We are now invited to live a whole new life without guilt or shame or blame or anxiety. We are going to be fine." (Pg. 172)
- c. On the Nature of Hell – "Hell is our refusal to trust God's retelling of our story." (Pg. 170) --- "Again, then, we create hell whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story" (Pg. 173)
- d. On the Nature of God – "Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the gospel does, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever... This kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can... That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable." (Pgs. 173-175) --- "What is God like? Many have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has 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." (Pg. 182)
- e. On the Offense of Hell – "And so there are conferences about how churches can be more 'relevant' and 'missional' and 'welcoming,' and there are vast

resources, many, many books and films, for those who want to 'reach out' and 'connect' and 'build relationships' with people who aren't part of the church. And that can be helpful. But at the heart of it, we have to ask: Just what kind of God is behind all of this? Because if something is wrong with your God, if your God is loving one second and cruel the next, if your God will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years, no amount of clever marketing or compelling language or good music or great coffee will be able to disguise that one, true, glaring, untenable, unacceptable, awful reality." (Pg. 175)

IX. *Bell's Conclusion* (Chapter 8 – *The End is Here*)

- a. Summary – Bell closes the book with a call to embrace his view of "love of God."
- b. On the Invitation – "Our invitation, the one that is offered to us with each and every breath, is to trust that we are loved and that a new word has been spoken about us, a new story is being told about us." (Pg. 195)
- c. On Jesus' Use of Judgment Language – "These are strong, shocking images of judgment and separation in which people miss out on rewards and celebrations and opportunities. Jesus tells these stories to wake us up to the timeless truth that history moves forward, no backward or sideways." (Pg. 197)

Synopsis

In his most recent book, *Love Wins – A Book about Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Rob Bell argues for a conflicted view of universalistic inclusivism that undermines many of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Essentially, Bell is promoting two things: His view of the love of God and His view of the freedom of Man. The result of these views is a God who cannot judge sin or satisfy his own desires and a humanity that ultimately gets to decide the extent to which they choose to enjoy or reject the blessings of God. In Bell's view, heaven is the present and future experience of all that the love of God offers while hell is what humanity makes for itself both in the present and future when it rejects God's offer. To Bell, Jesus is the savior that comes in many different shapes, sizes, and religions with the story of his death merely being a creative analogy of the love of God. Ultimately, there is no divine justice in Bell's theology and where there is no divine justice there is no gospel and where there is no gospel there is no hope. Ironically, the message of love and hope that Bell desires to convey to his readers is devastated by his refusal to deal with the reality of God's holy justice that all humanity is aware of by nature. Instead of pointing people to the most glorious display of God's holy love in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:6-8), Bell has exchange the truth for the lie of proof-texts, anecdotes, and personal struggles in a futile effort to silence the guilty cries of the sinner's conscience. To refuse to embrace the biblical doctrine of the justice and holiness of God is blasphemous and damnable. Bell's position on these matters clearly places him outside the camp of confessing and orthodox evangelicalism. He is a wolf and must not be tolerated. As shepherds of the flock of God, we must actively defend what is true and destroy what is false for the sake of the glory of God in the church of Jesus Christ.