A Summary of Rob Bell’s *Love Wins*
by Andrew Hess

Rob Bell’s newest book, *Love Wins*, has struck a chord with many evangelicals in the last month. Some criticized it before it came out (or they even read it) and some have come to Bell’s defense, including Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw. Additionally, the book includes endorsements from Eugene Peterson (most famous for his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*), Greg Boyd (no stranger to controversy for his own writings on open theism) and Andy Crouch, “Rob Bell is a central figure for his generation and for the way that evangelicals are likely to do church in the next twenty years.”

**PREFACE – Millions of us (4.5 pages)**

Bell starts by identifying with people who have “heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, ‘I would never be a part of that.’ You are not alone. There are millions of us” (viii). He reaches out to those who have been put off by some aspect of the Gospel and informs them they are not alone, and tells them they are the reason for his book.

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better…. 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 (vi).

Secondly, Bell asserts his desire for Christians to be able to ask questions without being dismissed. He believes “the discussion itself is divine,” using Abraham, Job, Lamentations and Jesus as models for his question-asking ways. “Jesus responds to almost every question he’s asked with…a question. ‘What do you think? How do you read it?’ he asks again and again and again” (ix-x).

Bell then encourages responding, discussing, and debating the “sacred text,” instructing his readers “there is no question that Jesus cannot handle, no discussion too volatile, no issue too dangerous” (x). He brings up the blood spilt, heresy trials, and debates over issues that were not that important without listing specific issues.

Lastly, he connects everything in *Love Wins* with what has been “taught, suggested, or celebrated by many [before him]” (x). He doesn’t see this book as a “radical new teaching” but the same old story, “That’s the beauty of the historic, orthodox Christian faith. It’s a deep, wide, diverse stream that’s been flowing for
thousands of years, carrying a staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences” (x-xi).

Referring to basic historical belief in heaven and hell, Bell writes, “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)

CHAPTER 1 – What About the Flat Tire (19 pages)

Bell begins his first chapter with an illustration from an art show and a piece of art with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. Someone attached a piece of paper which had, “Reality check: He’s in hell.”

Bell’s responds “Really? Gandi’s in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?”

Bell then launches into a long list of questions. Questions about how God could send people to hell and why he chooses some and not others and then ends with, “What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: What kind of God is that?” (3) These are provocative questions, but come off as irreverent and mocking if Bell is wrong. And Bell is wrong. He really needs to consider Romans 9.

This chapter is about who Bell believes God is. Bell doesn’t have room for a God who punishes sinners, “Is that the best God can do?” (6) he asks. Bell takes the love, grace, and hope the gospel teaches and completely drowns out the tough warnings.

To round out the chapter, he brings up several verses about salvation (Jn. 3; Lk. 19, 20; Matt. 6, 7, 10; Mk. 2; 1 Cor. 7; and Acts 22) and boils them down to several questions about how we get saved, “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 asked? Or is it what questions you ask in return?” (16). Bell had already pointed out that the phrase “personal relationship” is found nowhere in the Bible (10).

Bell goes on and on asking more questions and then ends the chapter with, “But this isn’t just a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions” (19). Well, that’s good.

CHAPTER 2 – Here is the New There (42 pages)

Bell’s chapter on heaven is built around his view that heaven will one day come to earth. He builds this from Rev. 21, where the heavenly city, the New
Jerusalem, comes down to the new earth. He affirms that heaven is a real place where God’s will is done completely by all and that at present, heaven and earth are not yet one (42-43). He emphasizes participating, “now in the life of the age to come…what happens when the future is dragged into the present” (45). Bell uses the image of partnering with God as we work to bring about the joy of heaven to life in this world, mostly in terms of social justice.

He does lots of exegetical gymnastics with the Greek word aion. Bell translates it in “age” but very few scholars agree. Most translate it “eternal.” Bell’s view becomes even more problematic when you plug it into other verses as in John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have life for an age. It doesn’t work here or in many other verses.

Bell makes the point that heaven will be free of sin and pain, challenging perceptions that heaven is “mansions and Ferraris and literal streets of gold, as if the best God can come up with is Beverly Hills in the sky. Tax-free, of course, and without the smog” (43). For Bell, being serious about the future heaven is being serious about ending suffering here and now.

CHAPTER 3 – Hell (31 pages)

Bell starts his hell chapter with the story of a San Francisco protestor with “Turn or Burn” stitched on the back of his jacket. From there, he sets out to walk his readers through every verse in the Bible with the word hell. Beginning with the OT, Bell explains there is no Hebrew word for hell, save some references to death and the grave (e.g. Sheol, death, depths, and pit). Bell concludes the, “Hebrew commentary on what happens after a person dies isn’t very articulated or defined. Sheol, death, and the grave in the consciousness of the Hebrew writers are all a bit vague and ‘underwordly’” (67).

Switching to the NT, Bell notes twelve instances of the word “hell.” He explains the Greek word Gehenna is where we get the English word “hell.” Bell explains that Gehenna was Jerusalem’s city dump in Jesus’ day, an actual valley on the south and west side of the city. And here begins one of the most unclear and confusing parts in the book.

Bell argues that all of Jesus descriptions of hell (e.g. gnashing of teeth, fire, and torment) are describing this “town garbage pile,” concluding that for most of the modern world, “the idea of hell is a holdover from primitive, mythic religion that uses fear and punishment to control people for all sorts of devious reasons” (69-70). Bell sympathizes, “I as well have a hard time believing that somewhere down below the earth’s crust is a really crafty figure in red tights holding a three-pointed spear, playing Pink Floyd records backward, and enjoying the hidden messages” (70).
After all that nonsense, Bell changes gears and describes more than 50 teenagers he saw in Rwanda who had arms and legs missing. He gives several other examples of deep suffering (rape, suicide, addiction, molestation, violence and adultery). For Bell, the pain caused by suffering are what Jesus was describing with the word “hell.” Bell does mention there is hell now and hell later and Jesus is talking about both. He notes, “Jesus did not use hell to try and compel ‘heathens’ and ‘pagans’ to believe in God, so they wouldn’t burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God’s love” (82).

Bell shifts to the OT story of Sodom and Gomorrah and pulls a verse out of Ezekiel 16 where God says he will “restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and then will return to what they were before”. Bell concludes there is still hope for even Sodom and then goes on a prophetic pick-and-choose, pulling out every verse that mentions restoration (he found 15). Bell takes what the prophets wrote about God’s people and applies it to all people. Textbook proof-texting.

Bell summarizes the chapter:

To summarize, then, we need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us. We need a word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God’s world God’s way.

And for that,
The word “hell” words quite well.
Let’s keep it.

CHAPTER 4 – Does God Get What God Wants? (24.5 pages)

In chapter 4, Bell establishes two parallel claims, “that God is mighty, powerful and ‘in control’ and that billions of people will spend forever apart from this God, who is their creator” (97). This just doesn’t jive with Bell, “Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants?” (98). Bell then lists the following verses out of their context (Ps. 24; Is. 45; Mal. 2; Ps. 65; Ez. 36; Is. 52; Zeph 3; Phil. 2; Ps. 22; Job 42; Is. 46; 59; Jer. 32; and Ps. 145). Each verse is used to make the point God will save everyone eventually.

Bell frames this chapter in terms of God’s ability to accomplish his will, but doesn’t spend much time on establishing what that will is. He asserts God wants to save everyone and is powerful enough to get what He wants.
Then Bell turns to the possibility that people could turn to God after death. He quotes Martin Luther, “Who would doubt God’s ability to do that?” (106). Bell says, “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. He claims there is a long tradition of Christians who believe this, including church fathers Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Eusebius.

Bell ends the chapter by switching the question to, “Do we get what we want?” His answer is yes. Bell concludes if people stand before God and still prefer “isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously give us that option” (116-117). What option? The option to go to hell? Bell doesn’t take it that far. He seems to believe that when faced with the post-death option in the presence of God between God and the alternative, all will eventually choose God.

CHAPTER 5 – Dying to Live (17 pages)

Bell opens with an illustration about an Eminem concert he attended when he noticed the rapper was wearing a cross necklace. Bell talks about the symbol of the cross, then launches into an explanation about the Jewish sacrificial system that was culminated with Christ’s death. He points out that the cross brings up the concepts of sacrifice, reconciliation, payment, freedom from guilt, and redemption. Then Bell asks, “Which is it? Which perspective is the right one? Which metaphor is correct? Which explanation is true? The answer, of course, is yes” (127).

Bell talks about the death and resurrection of Jesus and explains that like the food we eat, things had to die for us to live. He describes the gospel in terms of entering into God’s cosmic story and the personal result of the resurrection for each of us. Bell reminds, “Jesus talks about death and rebirth constantly, his and ours. Bell calls his readers, “to let go, turn away, renounce, confess, repent, and leave behind the old ways” (136).

CHAPTER 6 – There are Rocks Everywhere (22.5 pages)

Bell brings up a few stories of near-death experiences of God, people experiencing God and then turning to him. He then tells the story from Exodus 17 when the Israelites were thirsty and grumbling in the wilderness. They grumbled to Moses. Prompted by the Lord, Moses struck the rock with his staff, causing water to come out of the rock. Bell comments on Paul’s explanation to the church in Corinth that those who traveled out of Egypt “drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (143). Bell makes the point Paul saw Christ in an OT story that didn’t mention him directly. He poses the question, “Where else has Christ been present?” (144).
Bell begins to build toward the point that Jesus is bigger than any single religion, “He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain and name him, especially the one called ‘Christianity’” (150).

Bell then brings up the belief of exclusivity (some are saved and some are lost) and inclusivity (everyone of all religions are saved), and suggests a third way, what he calls “exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity” (155). Bell believes all people come to God through Christ but they come in different ways; that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Baptists can all come to God through Jesus Christ in different ways leaving “the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe” (155).

Bell closes the chapter with three reflections. First, don’t be surprised when people come to Christ in a variety of ways. Second, no one should think they have “cornered the market on Jesus” (159), pointing out he constantly defied, destroyed and disregarded labels and assumptions. Third, Christians should be “extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people’s eternal destinies” (160).

CHAPTER 7 – The Good News is Better Than That (18.5 pages)

Bell opens with an explanation of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. He draws out the significance of the father welcoming the younger son back after his rebellion and dealing with the rejection of the older son who refuses to come to the party. He describes both in terms of story concluding, “Hell is our refusal to trust God’s retelling of our story” (170).

Bell reaches out to those who are “haunted by the sins of the past” and offers them hope in Christ’s complete sacrifice. Then Bell turns to the older brother types: those who don’t love the generosity and grace of the Father. Bell poses the questions, “Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die? That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can’t bear it. No one can” (174). He concludes this teaching about God that he lovingly draws people all their lives and then sends them away to hell the moment they die is the reason many don’t love God.

Bell concludes that both brother-types need to trust God. The younger brother needs to trust God can remove the guilt and shame of past sins. The older brother needs to trust in the father and not in his own deservedness. Both brothers need to trust that the father’s love isn’t contingent on anything. It just is.
CHAPTER 8 – The End is Here (5.5 pages)

Bell begins his last chapter with his own conversion story. He talks about being with his parents, kneeling beside his bed and telling God he believed he was a sinner, that Jesus came to save him and that he wanted to be a Christian. “I still remember that prayer. It did something to me. Something in me” (193). He goes on to identify it as real and a defining moment in his life.

“I tell you that story because I believe that the indestructible love of God is an unfolding, dynamic reality and that every single one of us is endlessly being invited to trust, accept, believe, embrace, and experience it. Whatever words you find helpful for describing this act of trust, Jesus invites us to say yes to this love of God, again and again and again” (194).

Bell then describes that Jesus’ invitation to trust his love. He acknowledges the cynic and skeptic and reminds Jesus invites us to “trust that he love we fear is too good to be true is actually good enough to be true….Jesus calls us to repent, to have our minds and hearts transformed so that we see everything differently” (195-196).

He then reminds this invitation in “infinitely urgent,” reminding Jesus told several stories about urgency, “Goats are sent ‘away’ to a different place than the sheep, tenants of a vineyard have it taken from them, and weeds that grew alongside wheat are eventually harvested and ‘tied in bundles to be burned’” (196-197).

Bell lands the chapter and the book with a reminder that time is moving, we don’t get to redo moments, and that “Jesus passionately urges us to live like the end is here, now, today” (197). And then Bell turns lastly to love. It’s what God is, why Jesus came, why Rob wrote the book and what he leaves with his readers.

“May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the crack in your heart on one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones that love wins.” (198)

Bibliography
What others are saying:

This is not new. The early twentieth century and the rise of liberalism started the project of trying to defend Christianity by jettisoning everything the age considers unreasonable. Evangelicalism is so broad and diverse, and also thinner. The newer generation is making choices: many who want to be more acceptable to this age and others who are embracing the gospel, wanting it to be heard as it is. There is a big division taking place and Bell's book is a marker to this.

~D.A. Carson

...theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way.

~Al Mohler

Understanding what Bell truly believes and what he is truly seeking to teach can be a battle. The reader will find himself following many rabbit trails and arriving at several dead ends. It seems that where Bell's arguments begin to break down, he simply walks away instead of pursuing consistency and logic. This book could not stand the rigors of cross-examination. It has little cohesion, little internal strength.

~Tim Challies

The first thing that disappointed me was not the content so much as the attitude. There is an immediate ridicule of apparent “close-minded” people. A conversation about conflict cannot begin with ridicule. We should not pit the doctrines of God against one another. At the cross, the love and holiness of God both win.

~Tim Keller