

Rob Bell's Unbelief in His own Words

Scripture: Galatians 1:8–9; Jude 4

Code: B110418

"I have as much in common with the performance artist, the standup comedian, the screenwriter, as I do with the theologian. I'm in an odd world where I make things and share them with people." —[Rob Bell](#)



Rob Bell's denial of eternal punishment goes hand in hand with a warped view of the gospel. No wonder. Each error fuels and exacerbates the other. Eliminate every hint of punishment for sin; ignore the wrath of an offended deity; dismiss the demands of divine justice, and you abolish any need for the gospel.

The only hell that exists in Bell's theology is a state of mind or an earthly experience of suffering that Bell says God wants eliminated. But it's up to us to live rightly in order to end whatever hell on earth we might suffer. By living the right way we can exchange our earthly hell for a strikingly earthbound sort of heaven.

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 148: "When people use the word *hell*, what do they mean? They mean a place, an event, a situation absent of how God desires things to be. Famine, debt, oppression, loneliness, despair, death, slaughter—they are all hell on earth. Jesus' desire for his followers is that they live in such a way that they bring heaven to earth.

In that same paragraph, Bell ridicules the notion that the anguish of eternal hell is a greater and ultimately more serious problem than the afflictions of this present life.

What's disturbing is when people talk more about hell after this life than they do about Hell here and now. As a Christian, I want to do what I can to resist hell coming to earth."

In Bell's view, the reason eternal hell is nothing to be concerned about is because full reconciliation is already accomplished for everyone. Again, all people have to do is live accordingly:

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 83: *This reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross he was reconciling 'all things, in heaven and on earth, to*

God. This reality then isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making."

In other words, the only remedy for Bell's hell is something like the power of positive thinking. First of all, we must stop thinking of ourselves as sinners:

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 130: "I can't find one place in the teachings of Jesus, or the Bible for that matter, where we are to identify ourselves first and foremost as sinners."

Furthermore, Bell suggests this notion that universal reconciliation is "already true" means Christians should not make any differentiation between believers and unbelievers:

***Velvet Elvis*, 167:** If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody.

And this is because the most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way of Jesus is most vividly put on display.

To do this, the church must stop thinking about everybody primarily in categories of in or out, saved or not, believer or nonbeliever. Besides the fact that these terms are offensive to those who are the "un" and "non", they work against Jesus' teachings about how we are to treat each other. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, and our neighbor can be anybody. **We are all created in the image of God, and we are all sacred, valuable creations of God. Everybody matters.** To treat people differently based on who believes what is to fail to respect the image of God in everyone. As the book of James says, "*God shows no favoritism.*" So we don't either."

Bell therefore attempts to shift the emphasis from *personal* salvation for sinners, to an ambiguous emphasis on this vague hope of universal restoration:

Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 179: "Jesus wants to save us from making the good news about another world and not this one. Jesus wants to save us from preaching a gospel that is only about individuals and not about the systems that enslave them. Jesus wants to save us from shrinking the gospel down to a transaction about the removal of sin and not about every single particle of creation being reconciled to its maker."

He turns faith on its head:

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 124–25: "Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; he is doing fine. Peter loses faith in himself. Peter loses faith that he can do what his rabbi is doing. If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes that you can actually be like him. As we read the stories of Jesus' life with his talmidim, his disciples, what do we find frustrates him to no end? When his disciples lose faith in themselves.... God has an amazingly high view of people. God believes that people are capable of amazing things. I've been told I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I'm learning is that Jesus believes in me. I have been told that I need to have faith in God. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is that God has faith in me."

All those quotations are from sources that have been in print for years. These are not new opinions

being floated by Bell for the first time. So when *Love Wins* denies the heart of the gospel message, as Kevin DeYoung points out below, why should we be surprised?

Kevin DeYoung, [“God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of Love Wins”](#): Bell categorically rejects any notion of penal substitution. It simply does not work in his system or with his view of God. “Let’s be very clear, then,” Bell states, “we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer” (182). I see no place in Bell’s theology for Christ the curse-bearer (Galatians 3:13), or Christ wounded for our transgressions and crushed by God for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5, 10), no place for the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), no place for the Savior who was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), no place for the sorrowful suffering Servant who drank the bitter cup of God’s wrath for our sake (Mark 14:36).

Ultimately, all of this goes back to Bell’s view of the Bible. Having rejected biblical authority, Bell has set himself up as his own authority.

Bell has never affirmed the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*.

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 67–68: “It wasn’t until the 300s that what we know as the sixty-six books of the Bible were actually agreed upon as the ‘Bible’. This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God’s Word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true. In affirming the Bible as inspired, I also have to affirm the Spirit who I believe was inspiring those people to choose those books.”

Thus, he sees the Bible as merely a human book.

Andy Crouch, [“Emergent Mystique,” Christianity Today \(Nov. 2004\)](#): The Bells started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself—“discovering the Bible as a human product,” as Rob puts it, rather than the product of divine fiat. “The Bible is still in the center for us,” Rob says, “but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.”

“I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible,” Kristen says, “that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color...”

Consequently, he has no problem ignoring certain parts of Scripture and reimagining others.

Charles Honey, [“Velvet Elvis’ Author Encourages Exploration of Doubts,” Religion News Service \(Aug. 2005\)](#): The Bible itself, he writes, is a book that constantly must be wrestled with and re-interpreted. He dismisses claims that “Scripture alone” will answer all questions. Bible interpretation is colored by historical context, the reader’s bias and current realities, he says. The more you study the Bible, the more questions it raises. “It is not possible to simply do what the Bible says,” Bell writes. “We must first make decisions about what it means at this time, in this place, for these

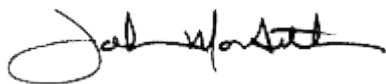
people."

As a result, Bell is comfortable distorting clear gospel passages, so as to escape the unmistakable meaning of the passage. For example, when asked about the narrow gate in Matthew 7:13–14, Bell responded with this novel interpretation:

Rob Bell, Interview with Lisa Miller (March 2011): "I think it's a great passage because the things in life that matter take incredible intention. And I think it's a passage ultimately about intention and the power of devoting yourself to something and to somebody. . . . Jesus—I think—is speaking of all the different ways that we lose the plot of what it means to be human. So there was a very real, political climate that He lived in and a number of people said, 'The thing we are to do as faithful people of God, we are to pick up swords and we are to fight the Romans.' And He's like, 'Okay, the sword thing? We've tried that. Let's reclaim what it means to be a light to the world.' And He takes them all the way back into their history, which was a narrow way, so I think it works."

Excerpts like those and many others only reiterate the point that Rob Bell's gospel is completely antithetical to the true gospel of historic Christianity.

Why would we be surprised at the stance he takes in *Love Wins*?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John MacArthur
Pastor-Teacher

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).