



Rob Bell's bestseller, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* is creating quite the controversy. *Time* magazine has now jumped into the discussion in the cover story of the April 25, 2011 issue.

In this issue of *CrossingCurrents*, we try to take a brief look at the elements of the controversy and, more importantly, what it reflects about the larger issues in the Church and culture. At the end of the article we provide some helpful links if you wish to look further into the matter.

If nothing else, the controversy Bell's book has generated is indicative of the great need we have today for sound theology. The events we reflect upon and celebrate at Easter should remind us just how important it is to hold to truth.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church, where some were questioning the resurrection, and reminded them that if that foundational belief were to be dismissed; then not even Christ was raised, our preaching is in vain, and we who believe in the resurrection are to be most pitied. (1 Cor. 15)

Be sure and cling to this truth. He is risen!!!

Rejoicing in the hope of the gospel,

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## The Controversy Over Hell By Bob Waldrep

Like many publications, the editors at *Time* long ago figured out that religion sells magazines, particularly during Easter. The cover story this Easter week focuses on a religious/Christian Church "controversy". Nothing new in that; the editor acknowledged they had done similarly forty five years ago when the cover asked, "Is God Dead".

With an angelic struggle portrayed in the background, the current cover boldly asks, "What if there's no Hell?" A thought provoking question based upon Jon Meacham's review of the controversial new bestseller, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, by Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. And, while *Time* waited to run its story to cash in on the "Easter Angle", many pastors, bloggers, and writers have already critiqued Bell's book in great detail.

Though Meacham is not critical of Bell's positions in the book, he does fairly present the primary concerns raised by Bell's critics; the first being that Bell poses the idea hell may not be real. While this may be concerning for many who profess to be Christians, where it takes Bell in his thinking about salvation is most troubling. In writing his article Meacham points out that Bell is

suggesting, "...the redemptive work of Jesus may be universal - meaning that [everyone] could have a place in heaven, whatever that turns out to be." (*Time*, p.39)

How far Bell is willing to go in asserting salvation is universal is not clear. Regarding this Meacham writes, "Bell insists he is only raising the possibility that theological rigidity - and thus a faith of exclusion - is a dangerous thing. He believes in Jesus' atonement; he says he is just unclear on whether the redemption promised in Christian tradition is limited to those who meet the test of the church." (*Time*, p. 40)

In his review of Bell's work, Southern Baptist Seminary President, Dr. Al Mohler writes, "[Bell] argues for a form of universal salvation. Once again, his statements are more suggestive than declarative, but he clearly intends his reader to be persuaded that it is possible - even probable - that those who resist, reject, or never hear of Christ may be saved through Christ nonetheless. That means no conscious faith in Christ is necessary for salvation."

As Mohler and others have pointed out, there is nothing new in Bell's message. Even Bell acknowledges in the book that others have taught these things long before him.

No matter how much you, or I, or other critics

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may disagree with him, the book he has written is not nearly as troubling as the fact that there may never have been a point in history when the church and the culture are as susceptible to such a message. Yes, the church must be included for, let us not forget, Bell is writing from within the church, and his is an increasingly popular position.

Meacham recognizes this convergence of church and culture when he writes, "A similar work by a pastor from one of the declining mainline Protestant denominations might have merited a hostile blogpost or two...but it is difficult to imagine that an Episcopal priest's eschatological musings would have provoked the volume of criticism directed at Bell, whose reach threatens prevailing Evangelical theology." (*Time*, p. 40)

These shifts occurring in the American culture are not new to Meacham. In April of 2010 he wrote an article for *Newsweek* titled, "The End of Christian America". In it, he offered his and others conclusions as to the state of the Christian Church, as reflected in polling done by *Newsweek* and others. Among the conclusions, he postured: "While we remain a nation decisively shaped by religious faith, our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago."

If he is correct, and I tend to agree with his assessment, it is staggering to think how far we, as a nation, have strayed from the Christian convictions and principles that once defined who we are. My concern is that the church is now being more shaped by culture than it is being the influencer of culture. The popularity of books, such as *Love Wins*, is just one example of this.

Consider the findings of recent polling as regards America's views on religion and the

church. In the *Newsweek* poll, 68% of Americans said they believe religion is losing its influence in American life; 25% said they believe religion is old-fashioned and out of date. Little wonder that the American Religious Identification Survey released in 2009, found a remarkable 20% of Americans have no religious affiliation with which they identify.

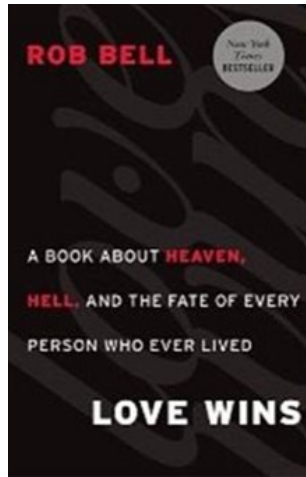
However, as positive as it may be, few will hear it when it is constantly being presented in the context of arguing against something else, rather than being allowed to stand on its own merits.

This is not to say that an incorrect message, such as Bell's, should not be addressed; but that it just may be possible we have grown more accustomed with trying to quiet those with whom we disagree rather than presenting our own message in a more positive and consistent manner. In other words, perhaps we need to do a better job of getting in on the front end of these discussions as opposed to waiting for the controversy to develop and then trying to deal with it.

The polling reflects that Rob Bell is simply singing a tune that is growing in popularity among Americans while we, in the Church spend far too much time singing to the choir. It is time to climb down from the choir loft and step into the marketplace to engage those who do not agree with us. It is imperative we learn how to effectively communicate the truth of the gospel in a culture that would prefer to have its "ears tickled", as the Apostle Paul warned. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Concerning *Love Wins*, Mohler concludes, "Rob Bell takes his stand with those who have tried to rescue Christianity from itself. This is a massive tragedy by any measure. The problem begins even with the book's title. The message of the Gospel is not merely that love wins - it is that Jesus saves."

Now that is a message worth sharing.



In 2008, Pew Research Forums released its Report of the U.S. Religious Landscape. Among the data was the finding that 70% of Americans said they believe many religions can lead to eternal life. Amazingly, among evangelicals who were polled, 57% said they believe many religions can lead to eternal life.

As the polling indicates, the popularity of Bell's book is probably based on the fact that its message already fits an opinion that many readers are predisposed to believe and accept. Rather than shooting the messenger - Bell - as many have done, perhaps we need to ask, "How did the Christian Church lose its voice in the culture?"

Somewhere along the way, Christians have become viewed as simply being negative and against everything. This is especially troubling when one considers we have such a positive message to communicate.

### Culture Tracks

#### Following is Statistical Data related to the "Controversy Over Hell" article

- 68% of Americans believe religion is losing its influence in American life
- 25% of Americans believe religion is old-fashioned and out of date
- 20% of Americans claim not to have any religious affiliation (almost double 1990 polling)
- 70% of Americans said many religions can lead to eternal life (57% of evangelicals agreed)
- 48% believe religion can answer all, or most, of today's problems (this is a historic low)
- 73% of Americans believe in heaven
- 62% of Americans believe in hell
- 68% of Americans believe in the survival of the soul after death

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