

Bell's hell draws heat, accusations of heresy from critics

March 24, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS)—One of the nation's rock-star-popular young pastors, Rob Bell, 40, has stuck a pitchfork in how Christians talk about damnation.

Bell is pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church, a megachurch in the Grand Rapids, Mich., area. His controversial book [*Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*](#), arrived in stores March 15.

Rob Bell

Critics pounced before the book even was published, provoking weeks of fierce infighting among pastors, theologians and anyone else who scans the Christian blogo-sphere.

In *Love Wins*, Bell claims:

- *Heaven and hell are choices we make and live with here and now. "God gives us what we want," including the freedom to live apart from God (hell) or turn God's way (heaven).*
- *Death doesn't cut off the ability to repent. In the Bible, Bell sees no "infinite, eternal torment for things (people) did in their few finite years of life."*
- *Jesus makes salvation possible even for people who never know his name. "We have to allow for mystery," for people who "drink from the rock" of faith "without knowing who or what it was."*

- *Churches that don't allow for this are "misguided and toxic."*

Small wonder that traditionalists call him a false teacher of a Jesus-optional gospel, leading innocents to damnation and a traitor to the evangelical label.

In an interview, Bell joked, "I am not aware that labels are the highest form of goodness and truth." He rebuffs critics who say he presents a Jesus-optional Christianity: "Jesus spoke of the renewal of all things. He said, 'I have sheep who are not of this flock.' Through him, extraordinary things are happening in the world."

Bell's view is "that God is love, that he sent Jesus to show us that love, that love demands freedom. So, making definitive judgments about other people's destiny is not interesting to me. The heart of God is to rescue everyone from everything we need to be rescued from."

Justin Taylor of the [Gospel Coalition](#), a network of traditionalist scholars and pastors, insists Bell's views are "dangerous and contrary to the word of God. ... If Bell doesn't believe in eternal punishment, then he doesn't think sin is an offense against a holy God."

Taylor's critique last month, based on reading a few chapters, triggered explosive arguments radiating from Christian sites to CNN. Now that he has read all 200 pages, Taylor is even more convinced of Bell's errors.

"Whether you like it or not, the Bible presents true teaching and warns against false teachers, even those who look like great people," says Taylor, digging at Bell's highly stylized videos circulating online and among churches coast to coast.

But [Richard Mouw](#), president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., calls *Love Wins* "a great book," well within the bounds of orthodox

Christianity and passionate about Jesus.

The real hellacious fight, said Mouw, is between “generous orthodoxy and stingy orthodoxy. There are stingy people who just want to consign many others to hell and only a few to heaven and take delight in the idea. But Rob Bell allows for a lot of mystery in how Jesus reaches people.”

During an appearance at New York’s [Society for Ethical Culture](#) on the eve of his book’s release, Bell responded to questions posed by *Newsweek* magazine’s Lisa Miller. She directly asked Bell if he considers himself a universalist.

“No, if by universalist we mean there’s a giant cosmic arm that sweeps everybody in at some point whether you want to be there or not,” he said.

Bell went on to explain that the love he espouses involves a God who would never violate free will. God, he said, is one of love, and love involves choice and freedom.

Bell’s caveat is that there will be all sorts of people in heaven, citing passages where Jesus warned that “all the people who are in might be out and all the people who are out might be in.”

Regarding hell, Bell explained that he believes in hell because he sees it around him every day through the human suffering in the world. He further said that he sees no reason that hell will not be extended into eternity.

-With addition reporting by R. Kevin Johnson for Associated Baptist Press.