

The Rob Bell Affair

My Brief Customer Review at Amazon Books:

I love this wonderful little book. I love it because it asks all the right questions, avoids pat theological answers, and penetrates the heart as well as the mind. The late David Allan Hubbard, formerly President of Fuller Theological Seminary, often said, if I may paraphrase: "Today, the church needs more poets, not more theologians." Well, Rob Bell writes like a poet and fully understands why St. Paul described Christians as "ministers of a new covenant" not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Having captured the spirit of the Christian gospel (or the Christian "good news"), Bell has written the perfect antidote for those Christians—and there are many—who find that lifeless preaching and a rigid theological message have steadily crushed their own spirit over time.

A book like this will never consistently receive five-star ratings, however. Even before the book was published, the heresy hunters, especially those who would twist the New Testament message of love and forgiveness into a message of fear and guilt, were out denouncing the book. By their hysterical nature, some of these early reactions, including some public (and almost unbelievably self-righteous) calls for Rob Bell to repent, demonstrate conclusively, I believe, that much of the opposition has nothing to do with careful Bible scholarship.

Not that the book presents itself as a work of scholarship. I daresay that every theological theme in the book will find support in the work of some first-rate Bible scholar or another, whether Calvinist or Arminian, conservative or liberal. But as Bell himself clearly understands, any interpretation of the Bible as a whole must be more than a work of scholarship; it is also a work of imagination. And it is Bell's inspired imagination, that is, the way in which he puts biblical ideas together, that enables him to address so effectively those crying out for a word of consolation and hope.

My Comment on Another Customer Review at Amazon Books:

Hello Dr. Steele,

I was surprised that you would choose this forum as a proper place to challenge Rob Bell's interpretation of various texts in the Bible. For given the complicated issues on which you touch so briefly, you would need to expand your remarks ten or perhaps even a hundredfold in order to shore up some glaring weaknesses in them. Even many Reformed scholars, after all, now find rather embarrassing the old Augustinian attempt to explain away Paul's use of "all humans" as if it really meant "all kinds of people."

I'll give just one example of what strikes me as a glaring weakness in your remarks. You wrote: "Bell uses the same line of reasoning in his discussion of Romans 5:18. He writes, 'Paul says that one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all' (p. 134). Again, if Paul is promoting universal reconciliation, he contradicts his teaching on unconditional election (Rom. 8:29; 9:6-23; 11:5-7; Eph. 1:3-11; 1 Thes. 1:4; 5:9; 2 Thes. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9). And if Paul contradicts his teaching concerning election, we have an additional problem with the authority of Scripture. May it never be!"

There are two obvious objections that you need to address here. First, it is simply a mistake to say that Bell's interpretation of Romans 5:18 (and a host of other universalistic texts) contradicts a doctrine of unconditional election. If the entire human race was unconditionally elected in Jesus Christ, as Romans 5:18 clearly implies, how on earth does the eventual salvation of all contradict a doctrine of unconditional election? You are probably confusing unconditional election with limited election, the pernicious idea that God might save some young mother even as he already despises her beloved baby. But if that is your view, then you must also account for all those texts, such as I Timothy 2:4 and II Peter 3:9, that so clearly express God's love for all and his will to save all.

Second, one could easily reverse your own argument and say something like the following: "If in the texts you cite Paul was really teaching limited election, he contradicts his own teaching on universal reconciliation (see, for example, Rom. 5:18, Rom. 11, and I. Cor. 15:20-28). And if Paul contradicts his own teaching concerning universal reconciliation, we have an additional problem with the authority of Scripture. May it never be!" You get the point. In an effort to avoid inconsistency, you adjust your own understanding of the universalistic texts in light of certain judgment texts. But one could just as easily adjust one's understanding of the judgment texts in light of those universalistic texts that declare the ultimate triumph of God's love. So why do you suppose that your own procedure is justified and the reverse procedure is not?

My purpose here is not to establish some theological view that would take several volumes even to argue thoroughly. I merely point out that Christians who find Bell's vision compelling have nothing to fear from those who would try to refute him with a few half-baked biblical arguments.

An Analysis of the Martin Bashir Interview

The reaction of the evangelical community to Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*, continues to be quite remarkable, in some cases even disgraceful, and reveals a lot more about today's evangelical community than it does about Rob Bell or his book. So when a host of evangelicals began pointing to Martin Bashir's interview of Bell as if it were a *tour de force* and had supposedly

made him squirm, I decided to watch the interview for myself. I was stunned, not by Bell's answers, which were both intelligent and appealing, but by the absurdity of Bashir's questions, which were more like dogmatic assertions than real questions.

Consider this. Bashir quotes a critic who claims that *Love Wins* is "historically inaccurate" and its use of Scripture "indefensible." Then, without even naming the critic or, worse yet, without citing a single example of a supposed historical inaccuracy or an indefensible use of Scripture, Bashir declares, "This is true, isn't it." As anyone who listens to the interview will discover, moreover, Bashir's tone suggests a challenging statement, not a genuine question. Had he cited even one example of a supposed historical inaccuracy, for instance, there would then have been something worthwhile on the table to discuss. But in the absence of a single example, how on earth is one to respond? It is as if I were to interview Bashir and cite a critic who claims that, as an interviewer, he is simply incompetent. In the absence of a single example of the alleged incompetence, the additional charge, "This is true, isn't it," would serve no useful purpose beyond a sophomoric attempt to smear someone.

As the interview came to an end, I found Bashir's approach merely bewildering—until, that is, I later learned that he was a member of a conservative Calvinist church at the heart of the firestorm. I then understood why he repeatedly confused post mortem repentance with the idea that our choices in this life are "immaterial" or "irrelevant" to the whole issue of salvation. That, however, is absurd. No Christian who accepts the possibility of repentance after the age of twenty need hold that a teenager's choices are therefore irrelevant to the teenager's salvation; and similarly, no Christian who accepts the possibility of repentance after physical death need hold that our choices in this life are irrelevant to salvation either. The truth is that all of our choices, both the good and the bad, those made before the age of twenty and those made after the age of twenty, are what God takes into account and works with as he brings us into a proper relationship with Jesus Christ and thus saves us from our sins.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about this unjustly celebrated interview is the way in which Bashir shoots himself in the foot at the very beginning of the interview. Citing the recent earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan, he tries to impale Bell on the horns of a familiar (but utterly false) dilemma: "Either God is all powerful," he insisted, "but doesn't care about the people of Japan and therefore their suffering, or he does care about the people of Japan and their suffering but is not all-powerful." Remarkably, on three different occasions he asks in a challenging way, "Which is it," as if there were no third possibility. Although Bell is just too sweet a person, it seems, to have done so, he could easily have turned this false dilemma back on Bashir in a way that would make many traditional Christians squirm. For most of those who died in the earthquake and tsunami were non-Christians, and these, according to Bashir's own theology, were thus destined for eternal torment in hell anyway. And given the traditional picture of hell, the degree of suffering there is far greater than what anyone suffered in Japan. All of

which raises a much more serious dilemma for Bashir. Either God is all powerful and doesn't care about those who experience eternal torment in hell, or he does care about them and is not all powerful. So which is it, Mr. Bashir?

-Tom