

DIVIDED BY HELL?

*An Assessment of Love Wins by Rob Bell:
Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Final Judgment*

BY
JR WOODWARD

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Introduction

John Piper, an elder statesman for The Gospel Coalition tweeted three simple words and linked to a blog post by Justin Taylor. Within moments, accusations flew and debates exploded among Christians on the Internet for the whole world to see. Within a week there are stories about this event on virtually every major media source, including *The New York Times*, CNN, The Huffington Post, and ABC.

What set off this firestorm among evangelicals across the twittersphere and blogosphere and gained the attention of the world? Three simple words from John Piper: “Farewell, Rob Bell” and a link to Justin Taylor’s blog, –“Rob Bell: Universalist?” While the blog title was tentative, the accusations seemed clear. “It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine.”

While the book was still unreleased, and only partially read by Taylor, who formed many of his opinions based on a promotional video by Bell himself, Taylor leveled the accusation that “he is moving farther and farther away from anything resembling biblical Christianity.” Now that the book is out, it seems that at least one tribe – those representing “The Gospel Coalition” have made their judgments.

Kevin DeYoung, whom Justin Taylor and others point to, says, “There are dozens of problems with *Love Wins*. The theology is heterodox [another way to say heresy]. The history is inaccurate. The impact on souls is devastating. And the use of Scripture is indefensible. Worst of all, *Love Wins* demeans the cross and misrepresents God’s character.”

So is Rob Bell a heretic? Will *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* become a classic, a passing fad, or a textbook example of heresy? As Christians in general, and as evangelical Protestants in particular, how are we to consider the doctrine of love and unity as we examine the doctrine of hell? History has demonstrated that we Protestants have a proclivity to protest and divide, and sometimes cut off the roots to “save” the branches. How do Protestants discern heresy from orthodoxy? Is there a “protestant pope” (either historically or currently) or a council of bishops who determine what is orthodox and what is heresy?

My goal in this essay is to review some of the more controversial parts of *Love Wins* and examine heresy and orthodoxy to shed light on whether we should divide over hell. Division should not be taken lightly, for God in Christ has been in the process of creating a new humanity, consisting of insiders and outsiders, of high and low people living in unity. Those who are too quick to call others “fools,” may find themselves on the wrong side of judgment. And those who are too quick to spurn orthodoxy may find a wrong turn leads to darkness.

The thesis of this essay is that by analyzing two controversial issues brought up in *Love Wins*, we can better discern if hell is worth dividing over. First, I will give an overview of *Love Wins* to understand Bell’s primary argument. Second, with the help of various scholars and writers, I will address two controversial questions that the book has stirred up:

1. What is universalism and is Rob Bell a universalist?
2. Does God’s love and mercy extend beyond the grave?

While there are undoubtedly more issues that could and should be addressed, these two issues are significant flashpoints for evangelicals. I plan to address them meaningfully, but not exhaustively. Third, I plan to examine Bell's teachings in these two areas to discern if he is heretical or within orthodoxy. Finally, I will conclude the essay with some practical advice on how our orthopraxy ought to inform our approach to orthodoxy, if we want to be orthodox. But before looking at those two questions, let's start with a short summary of the book.

Overview of *Love Wins*

In *Love Wins*, Bell teaches that God's love is universal in scope and reach and that the central truth of Christian life is about a transformative faith – it's about joining God in the renewal of all things both in this age and the next, as opposed to a transactional faith – where one prays a prayer in order to go to heaven in another time and another place. For Bell, heaven and hell are both present realities and future realities.

Throughout the book, Bell consistently seeks to answer the questions: Is the good news that Jesus came to preach concerned with getting a ticket to heaven in order to escape hell? Or is it more about an invitation to partner with God to bring a greater taste of heaven to earth? To accomplish this, he first seeks to subvert the common notion that salvation is simply a set of objective facts for an individual to "believe." Rather, it is an invitation to switch stories and join God in dragging the future into the present. When talking about heaven, he follows the path of N.T. Wright and others. He holds to a redeemed earth, where heaven and earth become one and things are done on earth as they are in heaven. Bell believes that our eschatology shapes our ethics and that Jesus is more "interested in our hearts being transformed, so that we can actually handle heaven" rather

than focusing on who “gets in” or how “to get in.” For when Jesus speaks of judgment, it often involves surprises. Thus he warns “us against rash judgments about who’s in and who’s out” (54).

From heaven, Bell moves to hell. He mentions that the Hebrew Scriptures are vague regarding what happens after a person dies, and then he does a quick sweep through every verse in the Bible in which “hell” is used. He sums up Jesus’ teaching on hell saying it is “a volatile mixture of images, pictures and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone” (73).

For Bell, “There are individual hells, and communal, society-wide hells, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously. There is hell now, and there is hell later, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously” (79). He points out that when Jesus talked about hell, he was addressing the covenant people who were straying from the God-given calling. He was not speaking of hell as the means of compelling the “heathen” and “pagans” to come in. He ends his chapter on hell by reminding us that “God crushes, refines, tests, corrects, chastens, and rebukes – but always with a purpose (86)... of healing, redemption, [and] love” (87,88).

After a review of hell, Bell makes the case that God’s love is universal in scope and reach and then he poses two questions. The primary question is, “Does God get what he wants?” In other words, is God great enough and powerful enough to reconcile the whole world to himself? The second question is “Do we get what we want?” In other words, can we choose hell? He says, yes, love wins, because love “can’t be forced,

manipulated, or coerced. It always leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins” (119).

Bell then calls us to join Jesus in his way of life by losing our life so that we might find it. He focuses on the victory of the cross and the many ways that Christians have understood atonement. He describes the good news as both cosmic and personal and cautions against a reductionist gospel whose chief message is the avoidance of hell .

After talking about the cross, he proclaims that Jesus is bigger than any one religion and that while the door is as “narrow as himself” it is “as wide as the universe” (155), thus calling us to be “extremely careful about making negative, decisive, lasting judgments about people’s destinies” (160).

He uses the parable of the prodigal son to question our view of God, saying that “Hell is refusing to trust, and refusing to trust is often rooted in a distorted view of God” (175). He makes the case that, when the gospel is primarily understood as an entrance into heaven rather than participating in God’s life now and forever, it is a reductionist view of the good news that leads to shriveled living. He questions a God who would love and accept someone one minute, and because of death, torment them in hell the next. He thinks the good news is better than that.

In his final chapter, Bell says that the end is here. He shares his personal conversion story, and then makes a passionate plea for people to choose this God of love by dying to the old life and living a new life. He calls us to live today as if it were our last day because time does not repeat itself and our choices matter. He calls us to choose love, because love wins.

Two Significant Flash Points

Having looked at an overview of *Love Wins*, let's focus in on two significant flashpoints that arise from Bell's teaching.

What is Universalism and is Rob Bell a Universalist?

First, I want to address a common charge that has been made about Rob Bell - that he is a universalist. Some say he is. In his interviews, Bell claims he isn't. Which is it? What is universalism and is Bell a universalist?

First, it can be slightly complicated to define universalism, because not everyone holds tightly to the same definition. Ted Peters, a professor of systematic theology at Pacific Lutheran Seminary, sees the difference as two paths or one. "According to the double destiny positions, when we die we enter one of two everlasting realms, heaven or hell. According to belief in universal salvation, only one destiny awaits us beyond death, namely, salvation in heaven" (Placher 2003:361). Peters defines universalism as the idea that, in the end, by the time we get to final judgment, all will be won to Christ, thus hell is not the final destiny of any human being.

The *Global Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Dyrness and Karkkainen, define it this way: "Universalism is the belief that eventually all human beings will be saved" (Dyrness, 2008:914). That seems consistent with what Peters has said. But then they go on to make a distinction between *hopeful* universalism and *convinced* universalism. They say, "Hopeful universalism finds reason in Scripture to be hopeful that everyone will be saved, but they do not believe that we can be certain of this. Convinced universalists, on the other hand, are certain about this, despite of the fact that Christians have traditionally believed that the Bible clearly teaches that some will be eternally condemned" (Dyrness

2008:914). They mention a number of significant theologians who fit into a hopeful universalism. When it comes to Protestants, they put Kierkegaard, Blumhardt, Maurice, Farrar, Barth, and Brunner in this camp, as well as reformed pastor Jan Bonda and evangelicals such as Donald Bloesch. When it comes to Catholics, they mention Balthasar and Rahner.

So what does Rob Bell teach on this matter in *Love Wins*? If we understand universalism as “the belief that eventually all human beings will be saved,” that “only one destiny awaits, namely, salvation in heaven,” then Rob Bell cannot be called a universalist. In *Love Wins*, Bell passionately declares that God’s love is universal, yet he never does away with people’s freedom to choose, because he states that love “can’t be forced, manipulated, or coerced. It always leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins” (119). Since God is love, and love requires freedom, Bell continues to hold to the fact that people have a choice. So Bell teaches the universality of God’s love without becoming a universalist. In this regard, he seems to live within the Biblical tension.

Does God’s love and mercy extend beyond the grave?

One of the more provocative teachings that Bell adheres to throughout the book is the teaching that God’s love and mercy extend beyond the grave. In other words, he consistently implies that people will have more opportunities to respond to God after death. Bell pushes for this extension of opportunity to decide for Christ postmortem in multiple ways. First, he emphasizes all passages in scripture that point to the universal scope and reach of God’s love. He makes the case that, when God corrects, rebukes, or punishes, it is always for the purpose of healing, redemption, and love. He reminds us

that God has made peace with all creation through Christ's redemptive work accomplished at the cross and he makes strong appeals to having a proper view of God.

For example, in Chapter 7, *The Good News is Better Than That*, he says,

Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the gospel does, and they were hit by a car and died later the same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them *forever*. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormentor who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony (Bell 2011:173,74).

He makes the case that if an earthly father was like this, we would call the authorities, and that if God can switch gears that quickly, it raises a lot of questions about whether God is trustworthy and good.

Bell here and in other places, makes the case for postmortem decisions. Is he alone in this idea or is this something that the church has taught? Most evangelicals give space for certain kinds of postmortem decisions. Most would probably not sentence babies to an eternal conscious suffering, without some chance to respond. They may mention David's words about seeing his baby in the next life. A number of people would give space for those who have never heard the gospel. Many would give space for those under 12 to respond to Christ, because they have yet to reach "the age of accountability."

But for Bell, these feel quite random. In addition, he says that if everything is about heaven and hell, as the traditionalist understands them, "then prematurely terminating a child's life anytime from conception to 12 years of age would actually be the loving thing to do, guaranteeing that the child ends up in heaven, and not hell, forever. Why run the risk?" (Bell 2011:1).

So is the God of second chances only the God of second chances prior to death? Don't the scriptures teach, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27)? How are we to understand this verse? The Lausanne Covenant is one of the more ecumenical evangelical statements of faith, put together in 1974 by participants from more than 150 nations at the International Congress on World Evangelization. Having read through this statement of faith, I saw how carefully it was crafted, especially as it relates to this current issue. Under article three, when talking about the uniqueness and universality of Christ it states,

All men and women are perishing because of sin, but God loves everyone, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God.¹

Notice the careful wording here when it comes to the final judgment and the fate of unbelievers. This statement is careful to condemn only those who have expressly chosen to reject Christ. It makes no definitive judgments regarding those who have not had the chance to reject Christ, due to not hearing the gospel or their age. One of the nuances that Bell brings up in his book is about the people who hear about Christ, but not the real Christ. He mentions a real-life example of a young lady who grew up in an abusive household where "my father raped me while reciting the Lord's Prayer... my father molested me while singing Christian hymns" (Bell 2011:7). Bell asks, will she face eternal conscious suffering in hell for rejecting that Jesus? In *Love Wins*, Bell pushes for second chances for everyone, postmortem. Are his arguments convincing? Is all this just an emotional appeal, or does it speak to our view of God? Are there other

¹ Found at <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>

arguments that cause Christians to believe that there may be chances for people to respond after death that Bell doesn't mention?

According to Karkkainen, roughly 25 percent of all self-identified Christians are Eastern Orthodox, which is the same amount of all Protestants put together.² So what are the Eastern Orthodox teachings on this matter? Can we gain any historical and theological insight from this rather significant tribe of Christians?

Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev is a leading theologian for the Orthodox Church with dual doctorates, a doctorate in philosophy from Oxford University and a doctorate in theology from St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. His chapter on eschatology in the *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* has some rich insights on this question of postmortem opportunities. Before examining this particular aspect, it would be important to understand some basic beliefs as they relate to final judgment. According to Alfeyev, the Orthodox believe every human being will stand before God at the last judgment, whether they are Christians or pagans, believers or unbelievers. In regard to hell, he states,

According to many theological and liturgical texts of the Eastern Church, Christ in his descent into hell liberated all people from hell – without exception. Truly, hell has been 'abolished' by the resurrection of Christ: it is no longer unavoidable for people and no longer holds them under its power. But people re-create it for themselves each time sin is consciously committed and not followed by repentance (Cunningham 2008:114).

For the Orthodox, "hell consists in being tormented by sorrow for the sin against love" (Cunningham, 2008:114). It is the belief of the Orthodox that, after death, the sorrow one has for sin is a belated remorse that is unfruitful, for true repentance is remorse and a change in the way one lives. And one only has a chance of correcting their

² Karkkainen, Veli-Matti, Lecture notes for ST503, *Ecclesiology and Church Global*, pg 8.

mistakes in this life. “As Symeon the New Theologian writes, after death there begins a state of inaction, when nobody can do anything, good or evil. Thus, one will remain as one was at the end of one’s earthly life” (Cunningham 2008:114). The orthodox hold to a judgment at death, as stated by Symeon, but at the same time they make a distinction between the judgment that takes place at death - “state of inaction, when nobody can do anything, good or evil” - and the last judgment.

According to Alfeyev, the Orthodox have always rejected the idea of purgatory, “where it was always thought that God’s mercy cannot be limited to just a certain category of the deceased. The Orthodox belief is based on the idea that, until the Last Judgment, changes for the better are possible in the fate of any sinner” (Cunningham 2008:115). This possibility of postmortem decisions for the Orthodox is developed fully by Alfeyev in his book *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective*. In this book, he gives a rich history of the line from the Apostles’ Creed that most Protestants are totally unfamiliar with: “He descended into hell.” He mentions that, while the Catholics view this descent into hell as Christ delivering the Old Testament righteous from it, the New Testament speaks of the preaching of Christ in hell to unrepentant sinners, and quotes I Peter 3:18-21:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirit in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited (I Peter 3:18-21).

This text does not stand alone for the Orthodox, for the descent of Christ to Hades is a rich theme in Orthodox history. As Alfeyev mentions:

Many church fathers and liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church repeatedly underline that having descended into Hades, Christ opened the way to salvation for all people, not only for the Old Testament righteous. The descent of Christ

into Hades is perceived as an event of cosmic significance involving all people without exception. They also speak about the victory of Christ over death, the full devastation of hell, and that after Christ's descent into Hades there was no one left there except for the devil and demons (Alfeyev 2009:10).

It is for these reasons that the Orthodox while not dogmatic, have a hope for all who have died and all who will die until the final verdict of the Judge is pronounced at the last judgment. According to Alfeyev, the Orthodox believe that "God will always, *eternally*, wish for the salvation of all people; but God will always, *eternally*, respect the free will of the person, and cannot save people against their will. This is the great paradox of the mystery of salvation" (Cunningham 2008:117). For the Orthodox, "the question of the salvation of all humanity cannot be addressed theoretically: it invites not speculation but prayer. As long as the Church lives – and it will live forever – the prayer of Christians for those outside the Kingdom of heaven will not cease" (Cunningham 2008:117). Their faith is backed up by works, as every day when the church gathers around the Eucharist, it prays for the salvation of all people who were created and made in God's image. So does this help resolve the matter? Some may choose to discount the Orthodox position, but on what basis? Will they also exclude what Augustine has written? I think not. I side with C.K. Chesterton when he says, "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors" (Chesterton 1959:45).

When Bell proclaims the universality of God's love and holds out for people to have the opportunity to make decisions for Christ postmortem, should this be taken as heresy or orthodoxy? Is he a heretic or a saint? How are we to discern this? Is it just up to our own personal judgment or does it involve something more than that?

Understanding Heresy and Orthodoxy

To help us out, I want to turn to Alister McGrath, a respected evangelical and a prolific writer who holds a D.Phil. in molecular biophysics and an earned doctor of divinity degree from Oxford. In his book, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*, McGrath seeks to synthesize important recent studies in the nature of heresy to understand its contemporary relevance. He seeks to answer two primary questions: Who decides what is definitive and what is dangerous? And how are such decisions made?

McGrath first looks at the Christian faith by analyzing the nature of faith, the creeds, and the Gospel. He then explores the origins of heresy. In seeking to discover heresy's roots, he takes us back in history to understand its background and early development. After examining the essential features of heresy, he looks at six classical heresies – ebionitism, docetism, valentinism, arianism, donatism, and pelagianism – that were identified by the church in the patristic period, to illustrate some “general principles that seem to underlie the origins and development of heretical movements” (McGrath 2009:11). Finally, he examines the cultural and intellectual motivations for heresy, as well as the relationship between power, orthodoxy, and heresy. He concludes his book by looking at the future of heresy. So what are the significant takeaways from this study?

Defining Our Terms

First, McGrath provides some working definitions for both heresy and orthodoxy. He defines heresy numerous times throughout his book with different nuances each time. The first definition in his introduction is, “Heresy is best seen as a form of Christian belief that, more by accident than design, ultimately ends up subverting, destabilizing, or even destroying the core of the Christian faith” (McGrath 2009:11,12). He mentions that

heresy is a way of formulating “core themes” of the Christian faith that, over time, are recognized by the church to be dangerously inadequate.

When distinguishing heresy from orthodoxy, McGrath says,

“Orthodoxy” and “heresy” are best seen as marking the extremes of a theological spectrum. In between these extremities lies a penumbra of views, which range from adequate without being definitive to questionable without being destructive. Heresy lies in the shadow lands of faith, a failed attempt at orthodoxy whose intentions are likely to have been honorable but whose outcomes were eventually discovered to be as corrosive” (McGrath 2009:12,13).

I appreciate his definition of doctrines as well. “Doctrines thus at one and the same time preserve the central mysteries at the heart of the Christian faith and life while allowing them to be examined and explored in depth” (McGrath 2009:29).

One of the more fascinating things McGrath discusses near the end of his book is how Protestants have dealt with heresy. Early Protestants were defined as heretics by the Catholic Church. So how did they deal with heterodox trends? They appealed to the “consensus of faith of the church as set out in the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon” (McGrath 2009:214), for Christianity as a whole declared certain teachings to be heretical. But what about new heresies that might arise in the church? McGrath points out that it is extremely difficult for Protestants to do, for a couple of reasons. First, for Protestants, since “Scripture is the supreme rule of faith, no interpretive authority can be placed above Scripture” (McGrath 2009:215). So when there was a major controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, they each accused the other of being heretical. But the problem, according to McGrath, is that “‘heresy’ is ultimately a teaching judged unacceptable by the entire church. The term is not properly applicable to either Calvinism or Arminianism, which represent divisions within one constituency of Protestantism – namely, the Reformed church” (McGrath 2009:215).

While McGrath speaks of heresy as something that must be identified by the whole of the Christian church, not a part within the church, he still finds defining heresy and orthodoxy meaningful today. When talking about the future of heresy, he says that “the pursuit of orthodoxy is essentially the quest for Christian authenticity...In a fiercely competitive religious and cultural context, Christianity’s future existence and prosperity will depend upon its presenting itself in its more authentic forms” (McGrath 2009:232). And second, he reminds us that history often repeats itself, like with Gnosticism, so we can look back at what the church has already declared as heresy.

My Judgments on the Matter

So how do these ideas help us judge whether Rob Bell in *Love Wins* is teaching heretical ideas or if his teaching is within the bounds of orthodoxy? I think they are extremely helpful. First, it is important to note, as Bell does, although in an exaggerated way, that universalism or what Peter calls in Acts 2 “*apokatastasis*” – universal restoration – is something that well-known theologians have taught throughout the age of the church. In *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology from Origin to Moltmann*, Steve Harmon, a theologian teaching in the School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University and a visiting professor at Duke Divinity School, mentions that in early Christian theology there were three major readings in regard to those who did not respond positively to God during their earthly lives. The majority reading, held to by Augustine and Tertullian, held that such persons would experience separation from God in ever lasting torment. The punishment was “eternal in duration”. Justin Martyr and Arnobius, apologists living in the second and third centuries, offered a minority reading. They held to the annihilationist view, in that the

punishment of the wicked was “eternal in effect”, once they are thrown in hell, they experience the “second death”, they are destroyed, and thus evil ceases to exist. There was another minority reading, which was represented by Clement, Origin and Gregory, who taught that “punishment is eternal in effect rather than duration, but its “effect is not destruction but transformation” (MacDonald 2011:63,64).

In addition, both Harmon and Alfeyev note that, while the Fifth Ecumenical Council branded some of the teaching of Origin as heresy, the objection had less to do with *apokatastasis* than with the understanding of the pre-existence of the soul and cyclical time. To confirm this, it is significant that both Harmon and Alfeyev mention that Gregory of Nyssa, who developed a “concept of *apokatastasis* virtually identical to that of Origin, save Origin’s protology, was never condemned by council or synod, was revered by the later church as a staunch defender of Nicene orthodox, and was canonized as a saint with a feast day on March 9th” (MacDonald, 2011:64). In addition, in my e-mail conversations with Harmon, he confirmed that although some of Origins teachings were branded as heresy, the church never declared Origin a heretic.

With this said, there seems to be much wisdom in a nineteenth century German pietist who said, “Anyone who does not believe in universal restoration is an ox, but anyone who teaches it is an ass” (MacDonald 2011, 64). I also would agree with Hans Shwartz that “Only those who are already in this life connected with eternity in time, with Jesus Christ” can have assurance, and “even in our most sincere concern for them [unbelievers], we have to acknowledge the ultimate hiddenness of God, a God who is beyond justice and love. At this point we can only *hope* without *knowing* for sure that his never ending grace will ultimately prevail” (Schwartz 2000:396,7). And so with the

Orthodox, “the question of the salvation of all humanity cannot be addressed theoretically: in invites not speculation, but prayer” (Cunningham 2008:118).

Conclusion

So should we divide over hell? How does the doctrine of unity and love shape our approach to our understanding of the fate of those who don't believe? When Jesus says, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35), he unites unity and mission. His prayer in John 17 gives me hope that visible unity can and will be reality at some point. If this is to be an increasing reality, as Protestants we must recognize that there is something in our DNA that takes pleasure in dividing, because we have become quite skilled at it. We must recognize we have much to unlearn and would do well to take Jesus' doctrine of unity and love seriously.

Understanding that unity is a gift and promise as well as a calling and task is foundational. Helping Christians overcome common myths in regard to ecumenicalism is imperative as well. Unity is not becoming Unitarian. Unity is not having unanimity on everything. We can walk hand and hand without seeing eye to eye on everything. It is not about losing our identity or our doctrine, but sharpening them. It is about bringing ourselves fully to the Lord's Table to listen and learn from one another. And finally, unity is not uniformity, all of us doing the same thing in the same way at the same time. Unity values diversity. Unity seeks to “speak the truth in love.”

When it comes to the two questions we address here, in light of what we have learned from McGrath as well as Harmon and Alfeyev, I do *not* believe we can brand Rob Bell a heretic. And, in light of the fact that universalism has been a minority voice in the church since the early days, and the fact that some in the past have gone further than

Bell on this matter, I do not think we can call *Love Wins* heresy either. That is probably why people like Eugene Peterson states:

In the current religious climate in America, it isn't easy to develop a thoroughly biblical imagination that takes the comprehensive and eternal work of Christ in all people and all circumstances in love and for salvation. Rob Bell goes a long way in helping us acquire just such an imagination. *Love Wins* accomplishes this without a trace of soft sentimentality and without compromising an inch of evangelical conviction in its proclamation of the good news that is most truly for all (From the cover of *Love Wins*).

Other notable Protestant leaders have chimed in with similar judgments, including Richard Mouw. So what about those who are calling Bell a false teacher or calling his teaching heresy? Well, in good Protestant form, Scripture is always the final authority in matter of faith and life, and each believer must make his/her own judgments on the matter, but of course the cry for heresy must be from more than a few individuals and it certainly needs to come from more than just one evangelical tribe, although each tribe certainly has the right to hold to their ideas of orthodoxy and heresy. But of course, that does not mean it applies to the entire church, or even just evangelicalism.

Maybe the best way to live up to our protest-ant name is to protest against death-oriented behaviors and death itself, whose sting was taken by Jesus so that death might be swallowed up in the victory of love. For who is it that has the keys of Hades and death in his hands? I have to say that I am glad it's not in the hands of those who easily call their brother a "false teacher", but rather it is in the hands of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. He, alone, is worthy to judge, and I have confidence that his judgment will be exceedingly beyond all that we can ask, think, or imagine.

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