

Rob Bell goes after stumbling blocks

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Rob

Bell's new book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, due out at the end of the month, is being promoted as "putting Hell on trial" and questioning the notion that a loving God could commit millions and billions of people to eternal torment. When the press release and accompanying video were released last week, the Christian blogosphere [exploded](#), with conservative Christians of various stripes critiquing Bell and calling him all sorts of names, none more damning than "universalist."

This isn't a new topic in American Christianity, and it [hasn't been limited to liberal circles](#). So it's disappointing (if unsurprising) to see [Bell's critics](#) greet his reconsideration of hell with shock and derision. (John Piper dismissed Bell with three words: "[Farewell, Rob Bell.](#)")

It's frustrating to see all this controversy over someone raising a question that's [been around for ages](#). I'm glad, however, to see someone of Bell's stature take it up. As of this writing, Bell has received 338 comments on his Facebook post of this compelling [video](#):

Unlike so many reflections on life after death, Bell ties our theological understanding of salvation and damnation to the very nature of God. Is God the one whose wrath Jesus saves us from? What sort of God are we worshiping, are we asked to put our trust in, if we must be saved from such wrath?

Of course, the depth and quality of Bell's argument remain to be seen--we will be able to gauge this when the book comes out. He's been criticized in the past for delivering old conservative evangelical theology in hip packaging.

But I'm hopeful. Bell seems to grasp that this issue is a serious problem for many outside the church--or lurking in the doorway. In the video, he identifies a central critique of Christians: that our faith is "an endless list of absurdities and inconsistencies." Bell strives to preach the gospel to the unchurched, and he may simply be heeding Paul's admonition to remove stumbling blocks to belief in Christ. The question this raises isn't an easy one--salvation is a key concept in Christianity--but it's a crucial one: which of the details are critical to orthodoxy, and which are mere stumbling blocks? What's necessary and what can be reinterpreted?

Paul tells us to "resolve" never to put a hindrance to the gospel before another person--and resolve is what it takes. Bell is putting his reputation on the line with this discussion; he's been lumped with Brian McLaren (I wish somebody would insult me like that!) as a false prophet who's decimated the gospel message. If he were a politician, we would say he is alienating his base.

But this is how reformation happens. Following the call to honest discernment means accepting some risks. I was proud recently when several retired United Methodist bishops published a [letter](#) calling United Methodists to get rid of language in its book of discipline that describes homosexuality as "incompatible with Christian life." Of course, retired bishops are in a secure place to say this; Bell has years left in his career.

But that career may be an increasingly blessed one if Bell's ministry continues to be shaped by pastoral and theological reflection--and if he keeps inviting others into conversation about the depths and breadths of Christian belief and practice.