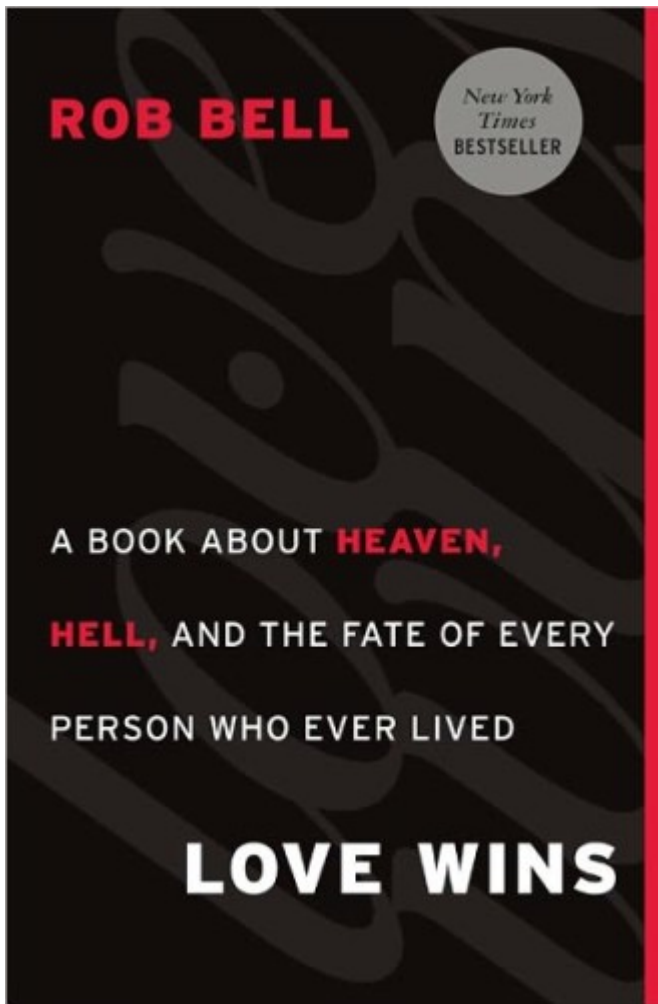


# Betting on a generous God

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue



**In Review**



## **Love Wins**

By Rob Bell  
HarperOne

When first-time guests walk up to our church door on a Sunday morning, what runs through their heads? I have long wondered what the average person must be contemplating as he or she grabs that front door handle and gives it a pull. What hopes, dreams or apprehensions are linked with imagining themselves landing in this congregation?

Having had later conversations with many of those onetime guests, I am ready to draw a conclusion. Ninety percent of the people who come to our church for the first time arrive with an impression of Christianity that is markedly different in tone and content from the variety of faith we practice as a congregation.

On the one hand, this shouldn't be surprising. There is no reason to expect that the perspective of an arriving guest should match that of the people inside who are familiar with the place. On the other hand, these newcomers look enough like those inside to suggest a basic fit. Nothing in their demeanor would indicate anything less than a contented match for the spirit of who we seek to be and what we profess as a congregation. They initiate the visit. They muster the courage to get out of their car. They must have some sense of who we are or what they might be in for. Or so one would think.

I have discovered, however, that there is often high anxiety behind the pleasant faces of the people who step through the door. They bring with them serious religious questions and deep spiritual nervousness. Their uneasiness of mind surfaces in later conversations, usually when these same individuals become comfortable enough to let down their guard.

Many of them join our congregation only after sharing painful church stories from their past. They wonder if this church will be an instant replay of the turn-off that was their last congregational experience. They worry about the pastor being manipulative or the worship being dull. They're fearful that someone will seize on their newness and expect them to say yes to working on kitchen cleanup. They are scared that this congregation might be another one that spends its money reluctantly, ignores the neighborhood regularly and obsesses over the carpet color weekly. Someone taught them that Christianity is mostly about rules and being good, so they are on the lookout for subtle boundary markers. On their way to a seat in the sanctuary, they consider the hospitality index.

Anxieties of a churchly sort are only part of the picture. The visitors are far more troubled by a theological suspiciousness. They have seen enough judgmental Christianity and heard enough baloney-filled expositions of the faith to be permanently wary. Once wounded by a disturbing expression of Christianity, a person may be a religious skeptic for life.

At the top of the wound list, injuring the faith and spirit of many innocent believers, is an encounter with what I call "arrogant certainty." When Christian people convert their spiritual confidence into theological certainty and then apply that certainty to their account of God, faith becomes ideological. Humility all but vanishes. Innocent people end up being damaged or dismissed by the arrogance.

The path to this certainty follows familiar patterns. Devout believers, professing to know the precise purposes of God (and having a corner on scriptural interpretations that confirm that knowledge), quickly become obsessed with being right. Have you noticed how love always takes a backseat when self-righteousness is behind the wheel? Convinced that God dislikes the exact same people and things they do, these overconfident drivers mow down anything that gets in the way of their personal possession of the truth. As far as they are concerned, there is little question of whom God accepts and whom God condemns.

The absence of spiritual modesty among people of faith is what caused Marilynne Robinson to remark, "There is something about certainty that makes Christianity very unchristian." When the focus is on absolute certainty in knowing the mind of God, the journey of faith quickly becomes impoverished. All that is incomprehensible and all the unanswerable questions have to be ignored or shortchanged. The wonder and glories of mystery get shelved. God begins to be more domesticated than our favorite pet.

For the theologically suspicious worshipers checking out our church, nothing has made them more apprehensive than their personal experience with expressions of faith that claim absolute certainty about the destiny of others. Why is it that a select group of Christians get to spend eternity in the bliss of heaven, while two-thirds of the world's population will writhe in the torment and punishment of hell? Are we to believe that God happily created billions of people only to turn around at the time of their death and eternally condemn them for not professing Jesus as Lord? Why is it that those who tout this divide with such certainty always seem to be speaking as members of the "in" or "saved" group and never consider that they themselves might be on the outside? These are the questions of people who are rightfully nervous about arrogant certainty in the church.

These questions have fueled theological debate for centuries. Plenty of God's faithful wonder why popular understandings of salvation often are uttered in the language of threat, especially given Jesus' propensity to speak in the language of promise. Jesus typically opened his parables with words of promise, not threat. "The kingdom of heaven is like . . . a mustard seed, a merchant, a pearl." When have we heard him say, "The kingdom of hell is like [this or that], so you'd better watch out"?

More often than not, the average person who walks through a church door on a Sunday morning has been dumbfounded to see Jesus used as a weapon against the

non-Christian world. Guests are curious as to the whereabouts of a more promise-filled faith, one in which the love of God in Jesus Christ is nonnegotiable, and where this same love creates some breathing space for respecting the faith of other religious people.

This curiosity is what prompted Rob Bell to pen his latest work, *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Book sales have risen meteorically—and so has the criticism, especially from pockets of evangelical Christianity where certainty about the destiny of non-Christians remains a central tenet. Plenty of readers, however, feel a strong resonance with Bell's principal claim that love wins in the end and that all people will be reconciled to God. These many sympathetic readers cannot find biblical justification for the idea that God would, in Bell's words, "inflict unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life."

Much of Bell's book wisely focuses on our perceptions of God. For example, why would God bait and switch in a moment's notice on such fundamental matters as love and condemnation? If God is our friend, protector, counselor and merciful parent throughout life, it seems strange that our death would suddenly evoke a vicious God. What sort of theology has God loving us one moment and traumatizing us the next? Such behavior makes no divine sense. Says Bell: "If there was an earthly father who [acted like this] . . . we would call the authorities . . . we would contact child protection services immediately."

The source of this contorted understanding of God stems from understandable framings of the gospel that have God, in all of God's holiness, punishing sinners. According to this common interpretation, Jesus steps in as the rescuer, paying the price for our sins and ushering us into eternal life. Most would not argue with this traditional view.

The problem with some implementations of this theology, says Bell, is that, "however true or untrue [it may be] technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let's be very clear: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction."

Bell insists that God has a larger job description than serving as the club bouncer who checks tickets at heaven's door. The author has spent enough time with stories

like that of the Prodigal Son—which is nicely explored in *Love Wins*—to speak with good biblical sense.

Bell has had a lot of conversations with first-time guests who worship among the 10,000 people who find their way to his congregation in Michigan every weekend. The cumulative effect of conversations with people checking out Mars Hill Bible Church has prompted Bell to question why the utterance of a specific theological formula would be required of every member of the human race who cares about eternity with God. What about those whose place of birth and cultural background never afford the learning of this formula? What about the child who died last week in the neonatal intensive care unit after only 20 hours of life? He wasn't baptized. Is he, or are his parents (because of some malpractice on their part in "not getting the job done"), headed for eternal torment?

Bell cites the case of Mahatma Gandhi. This nonviolent leader is suffering in hell because he was not a Christian, some Christians insist. Bell responds: "Really? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt?"

His critics argue that Bell's game plan is to make Jesus less offensive to his followers and more appealing. He does this, they argue, by endorsing universalism—the idea that it doesn't much matter what one believes, and any religious path one chooses is as good as any other.

Charging Bell with being a universalist doesn't work. Not only does the idea never appear in the book, nothing could be less applicable to somebody with Bell's own passionate faith in Jesus Christ. He simply refuses to limit how far Christ's redemptive love can reach. He makes an argument that easily frustrates those who inhabit a world of theological certainty and for whom truth isn't so much sought as it is possessed.

The glue holding Bell's project together is the firm conviction that Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He is the cosmic Christ who will not be co-opted or owned by any one culture. He is supracultural. The apostle Paul wrote, "In Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Godself," and Bell is not willing to say that what Paul really meant was a reconciliation of the Christian world. Similarly, Bell thinks that when John announced that "God so loved the world . . ." he actually meant the world. Had John been interested in shrinking the gospel or lessening the scope of the cross, he might have proposed that "God so loved only Christians." But John did not.

Bell fights every impulse in our culture to domesticate Jesus, reminding readers that Christians do not believe in Christianity; they believe in the Christ who wants to "draw all people" to himself. Christianity does not save. Islam and Judaism do not save. God saves. Regarding the oft-debated verses of scripture in which Jesus seems to be speaking exclusively, in which certain people end up on the inside and others are left on the outside (e.g., John 14:1-7), Bell is in the company of those who say, "Not so fast." He reminds us that Jesus did not use hell and damnation to compel heathens to start believing and avoid the fires of hell. Jesus was addressing his closest followers in an intimate way and doing so with the language of love. These followers may have not had it all together, but they certainly were not a theological tribunal receiving testimony on doctrine.

In one particularly thoughtful section, Bell suggests that "there is an exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity." In other words, Jesus Christ is the way, and unequivocally so. This Jesus leaves the door to himself as wide open as the universe. "He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation."

When Bell talks about the redemption of the entire cosmos and the toxic nature of judging non-Christian faiths to be inadequate, one gets the sense that the generosity of God deeply motivates Bell's heart. It's as if he sees Christ's saving capacities through the eyes of the vineyard owner in Matthew 20: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Are you envious because I am generous?"

Bell doesn't peddle the judgment of God lightly, again to the annoyance of his critics. He just fails to see the connection between people who don't say or believe certain things about Jesus and the punishment of eternal torment that is supposed to accompany the absence of such faith pronouncements. If the great judgment in Matthew 25 is Jesus' most exhaustive statement on who will go to heaven and who will end up in hell, which I think is the case, then it's noteworthy that Jesus never mentions faith in himself as the ticket to the former. The deciding factor of who is in and who is out has everything to do with how others get treated. According to Jesus, it has nothing to do with an explicit declaration of faith in him.

In the first three Gospels, Jesus seems much more concerned with making people well than he does with making them believe in him. In fact, he gives no indication that faith or salvation is defined by the correctness of one's belief system or the utterance of particular words that meet some theological gold standard.

The triumph of Bell's book is the absence of triumphalism. The only sin he attacks with any ferocity is the sin of presumption. Time and again, Bell challenges the reader to be open to surprise, mystery and all of the unanswerables contained within the "wide stream" called Christianity. When he asks whether we are living in a closed or open universe—"Is [the universe] limited to what we can conceive of and understand, or are there realities beyond the human mind?"—he is probing whether Christians themselves are open-minded or closed-minded. Do we have enough faith to let the other be the other? Can we bless our neighbors, in this multicultural neighborhood called the world, for who they are in all of their particularity, and not just for who we wish they were? Or is arrogant certainty our default position?

Bell's writing can be choppy at times. Seven consecutive incomplete sentences hardly make for grammatical coherence. But these deficiencies do not distract from the force of the larger argument. Bell has given theologically suspicious Christians new courage to bet their life on Jesus Christ.