

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

Pastor Rob Bell has ignited a firestorm of controversy with his new book *Love Wins* where he openly flirts with the doctrine of universalism (the notion that all persons will eventually end up in heaven). Many reviews of the book say that Bell has departed from orthodoxy and some imply that he may even have denied the faith. Though I've not read Bell's book (nor do I intend to) and though I recognize the challenges involved in reconciling God's love and his justice, I am deeply troubled by Bell's fuzzy position on the reality of hell.

People today desperately want to believe that ultimately everyone will live "happily ever after." Most of these are simply too lazy to think deeply about how love and justice work together in God's moral universe. Such people will eagerly devour *Love Wins* and likely urge all their friends to do the same. But this Bell is tolling a discordant note. Doctrinal error on this question can have disastrous and eternal consequences. The stakes are high. The debate over Bell's book has caused me to think again about what I believe about hell. Here are five reasons why the doctrine of hell is so vitally important.

1. *To dismiss the reality of hell is to make Jesus a liar.* Regardless of what Rob Bell or others may think of hell, Jesus certainly believed in its reality and spoke of it often, describing it as a place of fire, torment, worms, weeping, gnashing of teeth and outer darkness. Indeed, Jesus spoke of hell more than any other person in the Bible. If you take him seriously you are going to have to take hell seriously too.
2. *The existence of hell underscores the significance of our choices.* The invitation to say "yes" to Christ implies that we also have the ability to say "no." Without hell, the white-knuckle, razor-edge drama of life becomes a bland animal existence. The game of life has significance precisely because it is possible to lose it!
3. *If there is no hell, there is no justice.* Would it be just for God to force people to spend eternity with him in heaven when they never desired his presence while on earth? What kind of justice is there in a universe where God would allow Hitler and Mother Teresa to share the same ultimate destiny?
4. *Without hell, Jesus is merely a teacher, not a savior.* Jesus' death on the cross was more than a model of self-giving love. Because he alone holds the keys, he is able to save us from death and hell (Revelation 1:18).
5. *Hell proves the ultimate triumph of love.* Love does win in the end, but not as Bell understands it. As Paul stated in I Corinthians 13:5, *love does not insist on its own way.* In love God created free moral agents who have the ability to reject him, if they so choose. Hell does not quench God's love, it illustrates it. But there, his love toward the lost feels like judgment, even as sunlight feels like torment to a slug.

Pastor Stan