

## Burbank Leader

### In Theory: Is the idea of heaven and hell 'toxic'?

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Q. A new book has attracted a hail of criticism on the Internet. “Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived” by Pastor Rob Bell, the leader of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., questions the traditional view of heaven, hell and damnation, which Bell describes as “misguided and toxic.” It also challenges the dogma that “a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better.”

In a promotional video for the book, which was published on March 15, Bell says: “God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what gets subtly sort of caught and taught is that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that, that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good?”

Bell, whose church has 10,000 members, has been slammed by evangelical leaders, with one going so far as to say that Bell is toying with heresy by claiming that a person can reject Jesus but still be saved, which goes against the gospels and the teachings of Jesus. Another, Justin Taylor, said: “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.”

Do you agree that what Bell is saying borders on heresy? Is the dogmatic view of heaven and hell really “toxic”? Or does he have a point?

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As a Unitarian Universalist, I certainly don't consider the ideas expressed in Pastor Rob Bell's new book heretical. But then I am used to being considered a heretic by those of more orthodox Christian traditions. However, I can understand that evangelicals would see his beliefs as seriously disturbing. While I have not read “Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived,” I have read some of Bell's quotes and reviews about his book and find a great deal of congruence with my own beliefs.

No one has ever been to either heaven or hell and returned to tell us how it was, although there has been a great deal written about both places in many religious and secular texts. While described in many different ways, a number of religions have tried to explain what happens to us after we die as it relates to reward and punishment. To assume that the Bible is the only reliable source of information about that topic is a rather narrow perspective. Further, to believe that only faithful Christians are going to heaven or some ultimate reward is the kind of religious chauvinism that my Universalist side finds incomprehensible.

Bell's contention that the traditional ideas of heaven, hell and damnation are “misguided and toxic” certainly resonates with my theology. If we believe in a loving God, how could that God damn those who do not believe in his or her sovereignty, in some cases simply because they have not been made aware of a particular religious dogma? If we truly want to be in dialogue with those of all faith traditions, I believe that we must agree with Pastor Bell that “love wins” and that heaven and hell can begin here with us.

**The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford**

Unitarian Universalist Church

Of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

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I can hardly think about Rob Bell; I'm just so excited that 10,000 people will be showing up at my church this Sunday — since many in the Episcopal Church have held the same theological views about hell and so forth that Bell does for decades. Once this article comes out, thousands of people will come to St. George's.

We'll need more donuts.

Honestly, General Public, I just don't get it. We're here. We're right here: the church of your dreams. A church with an intelligent, thoughtful, tolerant faith. A church that does its best to do good and fight injustice in the world. A church with deep, mystical spirituality alongside a glad embrace of science and philosophy, alongside earthy, sensory, fun and real ways to be human, alongside beautiful liturgy with short-yet-inspiring sermons preached by witty and charming folks such as myself. AND we're totally cool with sex, alcohol and dancing.

Putting our theological cards on the table, as the Rob Bell bloggers put it, here are some things you will not be clubbed over the head with in an Episcopal church:

Creationism; Original Sin (the idea that babies are sinful and flesh is bad); Heaven and Hell; moralizing bigotry disguised as divine Judgment; Predestination; The Rapture; being washed in the blood of Jesus; substitutionary atonement (Jesus was the innocent victim, killed by God to take the punishment that sinful humanity deserved); misogyny; homophobia; intolerance of non-Christian faiths; and the downright idiotic notion that God uses natural disasters to punish people.

What's it going to take, for you, General Public, to get that not all people of faith are moral bullies and theological imbeciles? Is Bell's snazzy video the reason you flock to him instead of us? Fine, we'll do a video.

We're right here. The 'cutting-edge theology' that Bell is hinting at is old news to the Episcopal Church. Come to us, all you who are weary of ugly religious ignorance and intolerance, and we will give you ways to be in touch with the God of unbounded love, whose will is for humanity's wholeness.

**The Rev. Amy Pringle**

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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It often seems to me that many of us have a problem with the concepts of heaven and hell. First of all, we normally conceive of each of them as a "place." If heaven is a place, where is it? Up there? And hell—is it down below somewhere?

We further compound the misunderstanding by describing what happens in these "places" as a physical experience: We enjoy heavenly bliss or suffer the torments of hell.

It seems to me that we have forgotten that we are talking about things in the realm of the Spirit. Heaven is a state of existence, existence with God for all eternity. Hell is a state of existence without God for all eternity. These states are for those who are spirit and whose bodies are not yet resurrected. On the last day, the resurrected bodies will join their souls for eternity and thus there will be eternal happiness (heaven) or eternal loss (hell).

We believe that Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose so that we could be happy with him in this world and be forever with him in the next. This is called his universal, salvific will.

Jesus desires the fullness of life for all, both now and in eternity. He did not die so that a chosen remnant would be saved, but so that we would all be saved. He wants happiness for all, not just a few. He loves those who believe in him and those who do not believe in him. Somehow, his judgment in the end will be righteous as well as merciful. No one of us can yet comprehend how this can be. His ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our way of thinking. (Thank God!)

### **The Rev. Richard Albarano**

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church

Burbank

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I would say that heresy is yet one more thing I don't believe in; however, I've seen the Democrats more or less turn their backs on the poor, so obviously it does exist. If what Bell is saying "borders" on heresy, I'll once again be the one here to merrily step right over that line.

I believe that when we're dead, we're dead. I've given this much thought since choosing atheism as a teenager, and I must conclude that post-consciousness consciousness is impossible.

A neuro-chemical process constitutes the spark of life and also gives rise to our intellect and our emotions. This intangible yet very real spirit within us, for which I'll borrow the term "soul," is extinguished along with our physical selves.

So I'm clearly in no position to talk about the nature of the afterlife. Heaven and hell are extraordinarily powerful myths that enrich various forms of creative expression. Actually, only here on earth are they real possibilities, and it is entirely up to us, the dominant species, to determine whether life is more like heaven or hell.

As an atheist, I accept what we can know by observing those who go before us—that we will live on in the memories of our loved ones and in whatever goodness (or evil) we manage to create while alive.

Having said all this, which I truly believe, I also understand that none of us can know with absolute certainty what tomorrow will bring, let alone eternity. As I tell my family when they want me to choose cremation or burial, I'll wait and be surprised.

### **Roberta Medford**

Atheist

Montrose

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Bell's comments reflect an astounding ignorance (or outright rejection) of the fundamental, biblical principles of who God is and how we can be rightly related to him. Let's begin with the source of our theology. What we know about heaven and hell comes directly from the Bible — anything else is simply opinion and speculation. Whether or not we hold a traditional, dogmatic, popular or personal view of heaven and hell isn't the question. The question is: What did God reveal to us? The Christian faith is based on the Bible, every word of which is inspired by God, infallible and eternal.

Bell's title begins by saying that "Love Wins." John the apostle wrote that "God is love." Most people who believe in God believe this as well. The word "love" occurs 312 times in the Bible. But Isaiah reminds us that God is also "Holy, holy, holy." Jesus is "the Holy One of God", he prayed to his "Holy Father", and God's Spirit is called the "Holy Spirit." The word "holy" occurs 581 times in Scripture. Holiness means that God is absolutely separate from sin. No degree of sin is tolerable in his presence. Jesus said that he himself will tell people: "Depart from Me, accursed ones (Matthew 7:23 says "you who practice lawlessness"), into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Whether it's due to heresy or ignorance or negligence, a minister who teaches anything different has departed from the direct teaching of Christ and is promoting horribly destructive doctrinal error.

Because God is holy, he must judge all sin. Because he is loving, he provided rescue from our deserved and self-inflicted condemnation as sinners by sending his son Jesus Christ to bear the penalty of our sins in his body on the cross. John the apostle wrote: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

## **Pastor Jon Barta**

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

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Pastor Rob Bell has a point. In my view, many misguided Christians think they're the only ones who will see God in the next life, and I believe they are wrong.

I'm aware of such Bible verses as John 14: 6, in which Jesus says, "Nobody comes to the Father but by me." But I counter-balance that verse with John 3:16, which says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." True, there is a stipulation about belief in Jesus, but how can those of us who say we believe really think that God will condemn the kind, the compassionate and the loving simply because they belong to another religious tradition?

Remember the great parable of the Good Samaritan as told by Jesus in Luke 10? First of all, the Jews to whom Jesus told this story would have thought the term, "Good Samaritan", to have been an oxymoron. "There's no such thing as a GOOD Samaritan!" many would have thought. But who's the good guy in the story—the priest or the Levite, good Jews both of them? Neither one! The hated Samaritan acted compassionately, and the last words of Jesus are, "Go and do likewise."

We Christians all believe in the grace of God, and it's God's graciousness that saves us, not our works. However, if we think what we DO isn't important, think again. Jesus' words, "Go and DO likewise", won't go away from me, nor should they.

And to my evangelical brothers and sisters, I would advise paying more attention to the compassionate Jesus than to what is written ABOUT Jesus in the New Testament. Please don't become like modern-day Pharisees, who worshipped the words more than they paid attention to the Word.

My, but idolatry comes in so many forms, even in the 21st century! The point of religion is to be compassionate, but so many think the point is to be right. Thank you, Pastor Bell, for igniting the debate and for making us think.

### **The Rev. Skip Lindeman**

La Cañada Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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God has spoken affirming both a heaven and hell awaiting the righteous and unrighteous, respectively. If Rob Bell denies either, then he is heretical, and this appears to be the case.

Hell may be experienced on earth, as the term serves our purposes for describing evil. The Holocaust was hell. Molested children experience hell. But earthly hell only provides illustration for the reality that exists beyond this life for its perpetrators. God may be loving, but he is also just, therefore hell is necessary.

Likewise, heaven is seen on earth through kindness toward neighbors, as well as in beauty and pleasure. These too only provide preview of what awaits ahead in fullness. To accept one, we must accept the other; both are revealed by God as everlasting states.

Is hell a place where a pitch-forked devil pokes barbequed sinners? No, he will be a resident, not hell's warden. In collating descriptions of hell (darkness, fire, worms, torment, bottomless, etc) we grasp that the Bible means to convey hell as atrocious, and words inadequately describe that. You don't want to wind up there.

Bell eliminates the need for which the Christian Gospel (good news) exists. By denying hell's punishment, he denies the purpose of Christ. And thinking that hell is for people who reject Christ is only a half-truth; it's like saying someone drowned because they didn't hold the life-preserver. You drown because of the water, and hell is the smothered result of sin. Jesus saves us sinners by extending his nail-scarred hand. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (John 3:18).

Bell's erroneous gospel attracts those without desire to address sin, but the true Gospel preaches that no matter your strata, you're an equal sinner among men and are worthy of God's judgment. Good news to those among men who respond to God's provision for sin—Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is God incarnate, God himself takes away the sin of any sinners who want it and declares them righteous. If they foolishly refuse, they will surely drown in the Lake of Fire, as the bell tolls.

### **Rev. Bryan Griem**

Montrose Community Church

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I am going to respond to this part of the Bell's statements: In a promotional video for the book, which was published on March 15, Bell says: "God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what gets subtly sort of caught and taught is that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that, that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good?"

We need to know our theology. Actually, Jesus is God. As Christians, if we believe in the concept of salvation, heaven and hell, we also believe in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all God, yet distinct entities. They are all one, yet three in function. God sends no one to hell. Humans are born innately sinful. We have a sinning nature. God sent His Son, Jesus, to provide a sacrifice where we do not need to be doomed to eternity without Him. When we accept Christ, our sins are forgiven and atoned for, and we then are redeemed from our sin, able to spend eternity in unity with God the Father and God the Son.

Anyone can twist anything. That is why there are biblical studies: Language, context, content and culture need to be deciphered, not opinion of Scripture to support your own thoughts. I do not believe Bell has a “point.” Without accuracy, all fall prey to heresy. What makes him know the truth more than others? Scripture must be based on accuracy, not opinion. The Word of God is not toxic, it is factual.

### **The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian**

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

Pasadena

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As others will surely note, this discussion precedes the publication of the book, which isn't quite out yet. This means we are basing much of our discussion on blogosphere assumptions of Bell's theology.

However he answers them, the questions Bell asks about heaven and hell must be (re)explored. In our postmodern exposure to various faith traditions and their adherents, we are way beyond the certainty of memorized catechism and yes/no answers to questions of dogma. They just don't satisfy the way they used to. So thank you to Bell for being brave enough to ask hard questions.

In a recent foray into a community college classroom, these questions were tops on student lists. They asked me in several different ways where the boundaries are between heaven and hell. Did I think Buddhists are going to hell? How about people who are agnostic? How about people who pursue destructive paths?

I'm pretty sure that their questions were not geared toward securing their own salvation, but more toward locating the point at which I (and therefore God) could be dismissed from the equation on the grounds of judgmental hypocrisy.

I wasn't very satisfying, I'm afraid. Methodists are not particularly hell-focused. I can't even remember the last time I told someone they were headed to hell. I can't remember the first time, either. We lean more toward expressions of God's grace and forgiveness, acknowledging our common human need for second chances in our relationships with both humans and the creator.

That class was reasonably representative of the conversation among skeptics both young and old. No matter how vehemently Bell's evangelical critics deride and attack him, as Christians we can't deny the fact that a theological emphasis on hell distorts what is essentially an awesome invitation. Jesus invested a lot of his time on Earth in bringing outcast people back into relationship with God and with community. It is an invitation of love.

If Bell can help us unpack our doctrines and traditional interpretations and make that invitation clearer, I welcome his contribution. I ordered the book today.

### **The Rev. Paige Eaves**

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

La Crescenta