# Bashing Rob Bell: On Offering a Responsible Critique

Have you heard all the brouhaha over the new book by pastor Rob Bell, *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived?* Bell seems to be one of those prominent Christians who are either loved or hated. He is a well–known member of the emerging church and has been associated (rightly or wrongly) with a particular stream of it called the Emergent Church. It can be hard to keep all the labels straight and which belongs on which person, and I won't try to iron it all out here. What's significant, though, is that Bell has been accused of playing fast and loose with historic Christian doctrine. The specific accusation now is *universalism*, the belief that everyone will be saved. Just as I won't try to sort out the emerging/Emergent arms of the church, I won't go into detail on Bell's beliefs either. In fact, it's the reactions to (or, I should say, against) Bell's book that I'm interested in.

I first heard about Bell's forthcoming book some weeks ago. Last week a friend posted a link to an interview of Rob Bell by MSNBC's Martin Bashir conducted on Monday, March 14{1}. I watched the interview online the next day and then did a search on the Net and found dozens of blogs and web sites with articles about it and the book.

Two things stood out to me. First, quite a few of the writers had not read Bell's book. They had read a blog or two by people who had. One reviewer acknowledged that he had based an early review on nothing more than a publisher's description, a video by Bell, and a few chapters of the book{2}. It's risky business to criticize a book one hasn't read. But more on that later.

Second, there was a heatedness about the responses that gave

away, I think, either simply a strong reaction against universalism, or a strong reaction against Bell because of his views before the book was published, or both. The name “Rob Bell” quickly draws an “ooh, boy” response from some Christians (okay, a lot of Christians), and the charge of universalism sets the keyboards clicking. Bell is a lightning rod for controversy. Some would say he brings it on himself. Even though he says he isn’t a universalist, people are saying he must be on the basis of his views. That remains to be seen for me because I haven’t read the book yet. In fact, I haven’t heard much from him at all. Most of what I know about him I’ve gotten second–hand. Or third. Or fourth.

After glancing at a number of blogs about Bell’s book, I turned back to Martin Bashir’s interview with him. To be quite honest, I was impressed, but not in the positive sense. It wasn’t a good interview. Bloggers talked about how Bashir really nailed Bell. Someone said Bashir was tough on Bell because he got a free ride in other interviews. He wanted to get the truth. Bashir himself made that claim in an interview with Paul Edwards.{3} One writer said Bell was “gutted” by Bashir. Another said Bashir made Bell squirm. Still another said Bashir knows more about Christianity than Bell does.

Bloggers were really annoyed at how hard it is to pin Bell down on his beliefs. Were they annoyed? Or were they, in fact, pleased?

That’s a strange question, isn’t it? Why would people be pleased? What I’m going to say next does not by any means apply to everyone who has criticized Bell for his views or for his manner in interviews. I’ve heard and read snippets of reviews that stayed on point and kept the fire in check. But I also saw, as I’ve seen plenty of times in my years of doing apologetics, what looked like real excitement at the opportunity to light into someone for his false views. Just the possibility of heresy brought out the best (or worst) in heresy hunters. Apologists are attuned to ideas that don’t

accord with Christianity, and, unfortunately, sometimes an opportunity to do battle outruns good sense and common courtesy.

It could be that someone reading this right now will have read *Love Wins* and is wondering, because of the direction of this article, whether I am defending Bell in his (purported) universalism. I am not. I reject universalism. Probe rejects universalism. My concern here is the way the whole issue has been dealt with by the Christian community.

As I noted above, Bell himself has denied being a universalist. Well, that's rather inconvenient, isn't it? Some have responded by saying things like, If it smells like a dog and looks like a dog and barks like a dog, it's a dog. And after reading Bell's book, I might find myself agreeing that he sure sounds like a universalist. But there's something that can be done to find out for sure (or get closer to the truth). One could simply ask him his understanding of universalism! That wasn't done in the Bashir interview. The interviewer passed up a great opportunity to guide the interview in a more fruitful direction when he said nothing to Bell's brief comment about human free will. Free will is a problem for universalists. If Mr. Bashir had asked him about that, the interview might have been more interesting and fruitful.

The point of this article is no more to attack Mr. Bashir's interview than it is to examine Bell's beliefs. What I want to talk about is how we react in situations such as these. What good is it to pass around second– and third–hand reports about something this important, especially when others have already done it? Are we afraid that the rest of the Christian world will be buffaloed by a smooth–talking pastor and dragged into the depths of heresy if *we* don't alert them *right now*? Or do we just like the sounds of our own voices?

That's really harsh, isn't it? Maybe. But I don't mean to universalize; I'm just trying to raise our awareness of how we

respond to issues such as these.

What I want to do is list some principles I think are important as we face opportunities to publicly critique other people's views—principles that are especially appropriate for Christians critiquing Christians. Before doing that, I should answer the question, what's wrong with quick and sharp corrections? I've already given some hints by pointing at some responses I think have been off the mark. Let me be more specific.

First. there is the possibility of getting the person wrong and spreading slanderous accusations. There is no room for that anywhere, but especially in the Church. In—church discussions are rarely kept there anymore; it's all out there on the Web for everyone to see. We dishonor each other and our Lord when we carry on these fights in public, and we make it worse when we get it wrong.

Second, we work against our own goal of helping people learn to discern when we show a lack of discernment ourselves, when the example we give is shoot first and ask questions later.

Third, we don't advance our own knowledge and understanding when we see what looks like a heresy and start shooting without finding out what it is we're shooting at.

I propose these few principles of critiquing others' views for your consideration. These, of course, apply to all people. But here I'm primarily thinking about Christians responding to Christians:

> ***First, don't be hasty****. If real heresy is afoot, a delay of a week or so in raising the alarm can't hurt. On the other hand, having to apologize for getting something wrong can be rather painful.*
>
> ***Second, beware of jumping on the bandwagon****. When we were kids playing football, we loved nothing more than to pile on the*

> *guy who got tackled. It was lots of fun (until I was the one on the bottom!). Piling on in the present context can actually work to the benefit of the person being criticized, because the piling on can evoke sympathy in people, especially his own followers.*
>
> ***Third, know the person's position**. Know the person's position. May I say it yet again? Know the person's position! Let me expand on this.*

For one thing, nothing makes an apologist look worse than waxing eloquently and passionately against something only to find out he misunderstood what the other person said or thought. This brings to mind the late Gilda Radner's character Emily Litella on *Saturday Night Live* who would go on and on about something and then be told she'd misunderstood. "Never mind," she'd say. Getting it right may still not get you a hearing, but getting it wrong definitely won't.

To help get it right, don't rely exclusively on others' knowledge of the matter and their critiques. We don't all have the luxury of time to read a lot of books and articles and we may not have the expertise to rightly evaluate a certain position. We all rely to some extent on authorities. But if we do that all the time, we'll be getting a lot of one–sided understandings. When apologists go after other people's views, we usually don't spend a lot of time on the parts with which we agree! So you could be hearing only part of what the person actually thinks, and that part by itself could be misleading.

Another principle for getting it right is, don't key in on buzz words to the exclusion of explanations. This happened at least to some extent, I think, with Rob Bell. People called him a universalist, noted that universalism was denounced as a heresy way back in the sixth century, and then denounced him. By the time you read this, I may have read Bell's book and decided that, indeed, he is a universalist despite his

protests to the contrary. But in the process, I hope I will have a greater understanding of what universalism is and why people believe it.

For example, I'm especially interested in seeing how universalists work out the tension between the great love of God poured out in the supreme sacrifice of his Son (which is sufficient for all) and the freedom to choose on the part of people who don't want what Jesus offers. Are people free to reject God? If so, how can it be that everyone will be saved? These two things—the love of God and human free will—seem to come into conflict. To pursue that conflict could result in very fruitful conversation. Just keying in on the word universalism and lashing out would prevent the development of my own understanding.

A second problem with focusing on the buzz word without further developing it is that one would not be able to help other people think through it who are confused about the issue and need more than just a label and summary dismissal.

One last point about getting it right: everyone deserves the respect that is shown in getting their views correct. You and I would like people to treat us that way, and we should do the same for others.

So don't be hasty; don't jump on the bandwagon; and get the person's position right. One more:

> ***Fourth, beware of reading in bad motives****. Some bloggers said that Bell was deliberately evasive. Martin Bashir suggested that it would be bad for Bell's popularity (and for the sale of his book) to give straight answers (or to be "categoric"). What's the point of that? Maybe he's right. But maybe he's very wrong. It does absolutely nothing to advance the discussion of the ideas being propounded to engage in such speculation. Personal motivations can be discussed, but we'd better be very sure of ourselves before discussing them (and*

> *have very good reasons for doing so). To suggest bad motives before establishing one's case very well on better grounds is to commit the logical fallacy called poisoning the well.*

To sum up, all this boils down to the simple exercise of good manners, a demonstration of Christian charity, and the requirements of intellectual excellence and integrity. To modify a quote from Preston Jones, "Shoddy thinking with a Christian face on it is still shoddy thinking."{4} Let's know what we're talking about before we say it.

**Notes**

1. The interview can be seen on Youtube under the title "MSNBC Host Makes Rob Bell Squirm: 'You're Amending The Gospel So That It's Palatable!'" www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-qgmJ7nzA.

2. Justin Taylor, thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist. Later, Taylor posted a link to a more thorough review by Kevin DeYoung: thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/03/13/rob-bells-love-wins-a-response

3. The audio interview is available on Edwards' God and Culture Web site: www.godandculture.com/blog/msnbcs-martin-bashir-on-the-paul-edwards-program. This is the actual audio interview.

4. Preston Jones, a professor of history at John Brown University once wrote, "Scholarly incompetence with a Christian face on it is still incompetence." Preston Jones, "How to Serve Time," *Christianity Today,* April 2, 2001, 51.

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