

# Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism

*Rick Wade covers some of the pros and cons in the universalism controversy. Bottom line? No.*

In the spring of 2011, Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* hit the book stores, but the furor over the book started even before that. The charge was heresy. Bell appeared to be teaching Universalism, the belief that everyone will be saved in the end. In fact, Bell *doesn't* make a case for Universalism in the book, although his rejection of the traditional view of hell makes it seem so at first.

This will not be [a review of Love Wins](#) but rather a look at Universalism itself. It won't do to simply label Universalism as heresy and be done with it. The way people responded to Bell's book illustrates the problem.<sup>{1}</sup> It's better to understand *why* this teaching has been and should be rejected.



It is important to try to represent others' views fairly. This article, which is what aired on Probe's radio program, is too short to do Universalism justice; there is way too much involved in it. Here I'll confine myself to introducing some of the important issues involved. However, a longer article in PDF form is available [here](#) to fill out the issue some more.<sup>{2}</sup>

Universalism has been believed by some Christians since the early centuries of the church. What makes it attractive? For one thing, Universalists wonder how a loving God could send people to hell—a place of conscious torment—forever. Furthermore, God is a God of justice, and a punishment of eternal torment seems incommensurate with our finite sins, as bad as they may be.

Universalists find scriptural support primarily in Paul's

writings where he declares, for example, that “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom 5:18).

Before digging in, I need to make an important distinction. I’ll be talking about *Christian* Universalism, not *pluralistic* Universalism. Pluralistic Universalism is the belief that everyone in the world will be “saved” by some almighty being or force that the various religions understand in different ways. *Christian* Universalism, by contrast, is the belief that Christianity holds the truth about God, man, and salvation, and that, contrary to the traditional belief, *everyone* will be saved through faith in Christ, even if on the other side of the grave.

## The Love and Justice in God

Universalists take the traditional view of hell as being completely out of keeping with the loving character of God.[\[3\]](#) Philosopher Thomas Talbott believes that, because love is basic to the nature of God, everything God does has a loving aspect. Thus, there can be no eternal judgment against a person.

Because of this, Talbott sees God’s justice primarily as *remedial* or *restorative*, not as *retributive* or *punitive*. Speaking of Israel, for example, he points out that God “did not spare the natural branches” (Romans 11:21), yet eventually God will have mercy on them. Couldn’t it be the same for the Gentiles, too? God’s grand project since the Fall has been to save people. If He doesn’t save all, hasn’t He failed?[\[4\]](#)

Scripture claims both that God is just and that God is love (see Deut. 32:41 and John 4:8). It’s also clear that God administers retributive justice. This is seen in Isaiah 3:11 where God says that what the wicked “have dealt out shall be done to him.” Consider, too, God’s judgment against the

Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 20:16-17). There is no mention of restoration.

For Universalists, love is supreme; justice serves love. Why not the other way around? Why shouldn't love serve justice? N. T. Wright asks why *either* love or justice ought to be seen as the highest expression of God's nature. Perhaps, he says, both are expressions of God's *holiness*.[\[5\]](#)

The cross work of Christ is instructive here. Our hope for salvation rests on the fact that on the cross "He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:10,12,14; Isa. 53:5). What kind of judgment fell on Christ? It was *punitive*, not *restorative*, and it was properly ours.

Still, even with all this, how can we possibly regard *everlasting* punishment as just? It's important to understand that judgment isn't merely a reflection of a sin:punishment ratio. Believing in God in the biblical sense involves both our acceptance of God in all His glory and our submission to Him whatever He may command or promise. Thus, to *not* believe in God in this full sense is to reject God. So when people will be punished in hell, it won't be simply a matter of paybacks for individual sins. It will be because they rejected God.

## Paul and Universalism

In addition to the appeal to the love of God, Universalists often look to the letters of Paul for support. Writes Thomas Talbott, "Unlike most conservatives, I see no way to escape the conclusion that St. Paul was an obvious Universalist."[\[6\]](#)

Where does he find this in Paul's letters? Romans 5 and 11 are key passages. In Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam with the second Adam, Christ. In verse 18 he writes, "Therefore, as

one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." In Romans 11:32 he writes, "For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all." "All" is taken quite literally to mean everyone tainted by sin.[\[7\]](#) What can we say in response?

Paul's main point in Romans, with respect to the issue at hand, is that salvation is not just for Jews but for all people, and it comes through faith in Jesus. In chapters 1 through 4, Paul argues that everyone knows God exists but sins anyway and is deserving of punishment. Furthermore, the Jews had no safety net because they possessed the law; they broke the law themselves. Salvation has come through faith in Christ alone. In fact, faith has always been the basis of salvation. Paul sums up in chapter 5: through Adam everyone is tainted by sin; through Christ alone is found salvation for everyone. That he doesn't mean every single person *will* necessarily be saved is clear in Romans 11:22. The Jews who will be grafted back in are those who "do not continue in their unbelief."

Second Thessalonians 1:7-10 is an important passage for understanding Paul's teaching on eternal punishment. There Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, acknowledges that this is an especially problematic passage for Universalists.[\[8\]](#)

## Jesus and Universalism

It's often been noted that Jesus makes the strongest statements on hell in Scripture. Universalists believe they have been misunderstood.

Given that Paul clearly taught Universalism, Thomas Talbott believes, passages such as Matthew 25, where Jesus spoke of separating the sheep from the goats, must be interpreted in that light. Talbott characterizes Jesus' prophetic teachings as "hyperbole, metaphor, and riddle . . . parable and colorful stories."[\[9\]](#) He says that "Had it been Jesus' intention to address the question of universal salvation . . . in a clear and systematic way, I'm sure he was capable of doing so."[\[10\]](#) Jesus is simply teaching what would have been our fate were it not for the atonement.[\[11\]](#)

Did Jesus make any clear statements about the finality of judgment? I'll mention just three passages.

In Matthew chapter 7 we read the severe warning from Jesus that in the end not everyone who claims Jesus as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. "I declare to them," Jesus said, "'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (vv. 21-23). There is no mention of a second chance later.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), when those who weren't prepared knocked on the door and asked to be let in, the bridegroom refused, saying he didn't know them. One must be prepared or be locked out. There's no hint of a later unlocking of the door.

In Matthew 25:46, Jesus speaks of "everlasting punishment." "Everlasting" is the English translation of the Greek word *aiōnion*. Universalists argue that this word refers to an age of punishment because the root word, *aiōn*, means just that—an age with a beginning and an end. But *aiōnion* isn't just a form of *aiōn*; it is a form of the word *aiōnios* which means "eternal."

According to the standard Greek lexicon of our day, *aiōnios* can mean, among other things, with a beginning but without an end.[\[12\]](#) One example is when Jesus said He was going to

prepare a place for us (Jn. 14:2,3). Paul says that this new home is “eternal in the heavens” (Romans 5:1).[{13}](#)

When Jesus speaks of punishment in Matt. 25:46 as everlasting, He means just that. Everlasting life or everlasting punishment; it's one or the other.

## Postmortem Salvation

Because obviously not everyone dies in Christ, postmortem salvation is an essential component of Universalism. There must be people saved after death.

There is no direct scriptural teaching about postmortem salvation. The closest is the much disputed passage in 1 Peter 3 where Peter speaks of Jesus making proclamation to the spirits in prison (vv. 19-20). It is not at all clear that the event spoken of in 1 Peter refers to the evangelization of all the lost after death. Theologian and New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem names five possible interpretations of this passage in an article, and says that even more are possible.[{14}](#)

Gregory MacDonald believes that Rev. 21:25, which says that the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed, indicates that unbelievers can exercise faith after death and come in. Verse 24 speaks of the kings of the earth entering the city along with the glory and honor of the nations. MacDonald identifies these with the kings defeated earlier with the beast (19:19). They had been enemies; now they are not.

In response, we note that “kings of the earth” is a common designation in Scripture for earthly rulers.[{15}](#) It is entirely reasonable to see John, in Revelation, as talking about one group of kings who side with the beast and another group who are part of the kingdom and who enter to bring homage to *the* King.

The wall around the city marks a boundary between those who may enter and those outside.[{16}](#) “Outside” doesn’t necessarily mean simply outside spatially but can also mean those not included in the circle or group.[{17}](#) Those who are able to enter the city are those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life (21:27). No promise is given that a person’s name can be entered after death.

There is no clear promise in Scripture that there will be an opportunity for people to be saved after death. Are we willing to risk the eternal damnation of people by presenting the supposition that there will be?[{18}](#) Universalism is conjecture built upon a basic notion of what the love of God must mean. The case built from Scripture, however, is too fragile to sustain it.

This article barely scrapes the surface of this subject. I urge you to look at the longer article, “Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,” also on Probe’s web site.

## Notes

1. My comments regarding the hasty reaction to *Love Wins* are given in a short article on Probe’s web site titled [“\(Ir\)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair.”](#)
2. The longer version, titled [“Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,”](#) is available on Probe’s web site.
3. Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, states that “The love of God is very important for the Universalist. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a strong belief in God’s love that often drives people towards Universalism.” Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 100. Note that “Gregory MacDonald” is a pen name used by Robin A. Parry. To reduce the possibility for confusion over book titles and author names, I will refer to him as MacDonald when referencing his book *The Evangelical Universalist*.

4. See for example John A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row: 1968), 116.
5. N. T. Wright, "Universalism and the World-Wide Community," *Churchman* 89 (1975): 197-212.
6. Thomas Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 48.
7. Thomas Talbott, "Christ Victorious," in Parry and Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?*, 18-19.
8. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*. 151-54.
9. Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge., eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.
10. Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 50-51, n. 18.
11. Ibid., 45.
12. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "????????".
13. Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 4:14, John 6:51, 58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:26; and Rev. 22:5. Another reason we know eternal life extends into the future in a temporal sense is because it is the life of the Son and he has no end (1 Jn. 5:11; cf. Jn. 1:4). We will have life everlasting because Jesus, to whom we are now connected, has life everlasting.
14. Wayne A. Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7.2 (Fall, 1986): 3-31.

15. See Matt. 17:25; Acts 4:26; Rev. 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9.

16. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. "Wall, Hedge, Palisade," by N. Hillyer, 3:948. Hillyer takes the wall to be symbolic, but the same meaning would apply to a literal interpretation.

17. For other Scriptures on this use of "outside" see Mk. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12f; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12.

18. See Jay Wesley Richards, "A Pascalian Argument Against Universalism," in William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 217-218.

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## God Wins: A Critique of Rob Bell's Love Wins

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran critiques Rob Bell's controversial book denying the biblical teaching on hell, arguing that Bell offers another gospel.*

### A New Kind of "Christianity"



Will all people regardless of their belief enter heaven? In a new book, *Love Wins*, mega church pastor Rob Bell presents his case for universal salvation. Bell states that a

Christianity that teaches many will spend eternity in hell while some go to heaven is “misguided and toxic.”[\[1\]](#) Bell asserts that the message Christians have preached for centuries is actually a harmful message.

Bell argues that God loves everyone and desires all people to be saved. However if the majority of people never come to faith in Christ and spend eternity in hell, God fails to accomplish His will. Since this is not an acceptable conclusion, the only logical conclusion left is that in the end, all will eventually receive His love and enter into heaven.

Bell begins by bombarding the reader with hundreds of questions. The questions are meant to challenge and expose the alleged inconsistencies of traditional teachings and prepare you for his case for universal salvation. On page 1 he writes,

Will only a few select people make it to heaven, and will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case, how do you know? How do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe, or what you say, or what you do, or who you know, or something that happens in your heart, or do you need to be initiated, or baptized, or take a class, or converted, or be born again? How does someone become one of these few? And then there's a question behind the question—the real question: What is God like? Because millions and millions of people who were taught that the primary message, this center of the Gospel of Jesus, is that God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what got 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? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?[\[2\]](#)

These are good questions and deserve to be asked. "Traditional" beliefs may not always be right, and at times they deserve to be reexamined. Bell then in the final pages of his preface implies that those who oppose his view are judgmental and not open to discussion of vital doctrines of the faith. This is part of his strategy to discourage any criticism of his position. However, Scripture calls us to evaluate all teachings and discern truth from error (1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1).



In the process of defending his thesis, Bell ends up presenting a new kind of Gospel. Since theological doctrines are connected, when you change the gospel message there is a chain effect that follows. His gospel ends up presenting a distorted understanding of God's character, a variant view of the atonement, and a heaven and hell foreign to the scriptures.

Bell struggles with a significant question: "Will those without Christ truly spend eternity in hell? Could there be a possibility that they have a chance after death to repent?" The idea that a loved one will spend eternity in hell is a difficult one to accept. Careful study of all the relevant scriptures is necessary when we examine a particular doctrine, especially one regarding our salvation. If in the end we are faced with a conclusion we do not like, we must not compromise biblical truth but accept the words of Christ. Paul warns us in Galatians 1:9 the danger of preaching another gospel. When it comes to essential doctrines of the faith, Christians cannot compromise on the truths taught in Scripture. For this reason we must carefully examine Bell's teachings and see if it is compatible with, or a compromise of, the gospel of Christ.

## Another Kind of Gospel

To support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter into heaven, Bell must alter the gospel message. He admits that his message departs from traditional Christianity and declares that the message preached for past centuries is misguided and in need of transformation.

A staggering number of people have been taught 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. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.[{3}](#)

The traditional message that salvation comes only to those who accept Christ in their lifetime is rejected by Bell. He believes that all people are reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross regardless of whether they choose to put their faith in Christ or not. Those who do not receive Christ in this lifetime will spend some time in hell but no one will remain there forever. Eventually all people will respond to God's love, even those in hell and enter heaven. Bell states this on several occasions:

At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners" will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.[{4}](#)

To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever,

because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.{5}

At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.{6}

Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything but everybody.{7}

Bell points to several Scriptures to support his argument. One passage is 1 Corinthians 13 which states, "Love never fails." Therefore he concludes, God's love will reach all lost people even those in hell and they will eventually turn to Him since no one can resist God's love forever.

However, there are many passages in the Bible that teach the unrighteous are eternally separated from God and the righteous are forever with God. Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny for the righteous and unrighteous: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and judgment of all people. Some will inherit eternal life and others will suffer "everlasting contempt." Daniel teaches in this passage that not all individuals will enter into everlasting life. Those who do not are destined to "everlasting contempt." The Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām*. The word in this context signifies an indefinite futurity, forever, or always. It refers to an unending future.{8} This is the most likely definition for *ôlām* used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God: "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward

heaven and swore by him who lives *forever...*" We know that God is eternal. Therefore, Daniel is using the term "*ôlām*" to mean everlasting and never ending.

Jude 7 states, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." The Greek word for eternal is *aiōnios* which means "eternal, perpetual, to time in its duration, constant, abiding. When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time." [{9}](#) The word again is used in verse 21 to refer to "eternal" or never ending life with God. So in the context of Jude *aiōnios* is used to refer to an eternal state.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus invites, "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus taught an exclusive view of salvation. He stated clearly not everyone will inherit eternal life; in fact many will follow the path of destruction. This verse speaks against the doctrine of universal salvation.

Hebrews 9:27 ("it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment") teaches that there is no second chance for salvation after death. The preceding verses teach that Christ made the perfect sacrifice for sin once and for all. He paid the price once and His sacrifice is for all time. In the same way that Christ's atonement is final, so all men and women die once and face a judgment which is final and eternal in its sentence.

Bell's gospel is a departure from biblical teaching. God is love and therefore, He does not impose His will on those who refuse to receive His love. He honors the choice of individuals to receive or reject Him. Those who reject Him in

this life will not want to be with Him for all eternity. God honors their choice and places them away from His presence in hell. Thus, God's character of love honoring one's choice is upheld. But God's character of justice in dealing with sin is also upheld.

## **Are All Reconciled to God?**

There are several key passages Bell uses to support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter heaven. One key verse that deserves attention is Colossians 1:20, a favorite verse used by many universalists: "and through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." According to Bell, the entire world is reconciled to God through the death of Christ. Christ's death has atoned for all sin and places every person in right standing with God. Those who turn to God in this life will enter heaven immediately. Those who reject God's love in this lifetime will be temporarily separated from God in hell but will eventually receive His love and enter heaven.

Contrary to Bell's interpretation, this verse does not teach a universal salvation. Rather, it presents the scope, goal, and means of reconciliation. The scope of reconciliation extends not just to human beings but to all of creation which was affected by sin. Romans 8:20-22 says,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

The physical world was affected by sin, not by its choice but by the choice of Adam. Christ's victory over sin restored

order over creation by bringing it again under His lordship, and full restoration will take place in the future.[{10}](#)

Angels and human beings, unlike the material world, have a choice. Reconciliation involves two parties who voluntarily decide to make peace. In this case fallen angels knowingly rebelled against Christ and reconciliation is not possible. Humans also must make a choice to receive God's invitation through Christ or to reject it. This is made clear in the following verses:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

Paul states that we were once "alienated" from God and we are reconciled "if indeed you continue in the faith . . . not shifting from the hope of the gospel." The reconciliation depends on the believer receiving Christ by faith and persevering in that faith. Numerous other verses make faith in Christ necessary for reconciliation (Jn. 3:18, 5:24; Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26).

Those who receive God's gift of life will attain blessings and salvation. Those who refuse are sentenced to eternal death (Jn. 3:18). In the end all things will be put in their proper place. It is in this context all things will be reconciled to Christ and in submission to His lordship (Phil. 2:5-11).

## **Another Kind of God**

In his effort to defend his thesis that in the end everyone goes to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the message of the gospel.

However, in doing so, he also alters the character of God. Among the hundreds of questions with which Bell bombards his readers, he asks the following: "If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection? . . . God choosing you instead of others? What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: what kind of God is that?"[\[11\]](#) For Bell, a God who would send billions to an eternal hell would not be a God of love. However, in emphasizing God's character of love he ends up ignoring God's other attributes, and in the end alters the character of God.

Bell is correct in stating that God is love. However, he commits an error common among universalists. Bell ends up presenting an imbalanced view of God that emphasizes God's character of love to the neglect of the other character qualities of God. Love is not the only or the most dominant character of God. Along with love, God has other character qualities which exist together in a perfect balance.

Among the numerous qualities of God, the Bible teaches that God is also just (2 Thess. 1:6), He is holy (Isa 6:3), He is righteous (Ps. 7:11), sovereign (Jude 4), wise (1 Cor. 3:19) true (Jn. 14:6), etc. There are many qualities of God that are just as important as love, and they exist in a perfect balance. Thus, emphasizing one trait to the exclusion of others leads to flawed theology.

God is love and God desires that all individuals be saved. However, God is also just and holy and must deal righteously with sin. God's character of holiness is well emphasized throughout the Bible. This is the theme of Leviticus and, throughout this book, God presents detailed instructions for dealing with sin through the sacrificial system. The Levitical sacrifices are fulfilled in the death of Christ who fulfills the righteousness of God.

The theme in the prophets is that Israel has violated the holiness of God and thus God must judge their sins. Isaiah 5:16 states, "But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness." God, being a loving God, sent prophets to warn Israel to turn from their idolatry and disobedience and return to Him. However, after generations of refusal by Israel, God finally had to judge the sins of the people. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to live holy lives for that reflects the character of God (Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-6).

Those who refuse the gift of Christ's work on the cross have not been cleansed from their sin and therefore cannot enter the holy presence of God. This is the theme of Hebrews 9, which teaches us that access to God represented in the Holy of Holies at the Temple was not accessible to us. However, the blood of Christ fulfilled the holiness of God and cleansed sinners and made us holy before God. Only through the blood of Christ is this made possible.

Bell emphasizes God's love but diminishes His holiness and righteousness; therefore, the magnitude of our sin, its effect on our nature, and its offense to God are diminished. God hates sin and judges sin seriously. In Revelation, the wrath of God is poured out upon the world in rebellion. In Revelation 20, those individuals not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. To build a picture of God who is excluded of His holiness, justice and righteousness, who does not judge sin, is to present an imbalanced and false view of God.

Bell argues,

Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, . . . God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would in essence become a fundamentally different

being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. . . . If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like that could ever be trusted, let alone good.[\[12\]](#)

Bell argues that God changes according to the decision of individuals. However, God is not the one who changes. He is always loving and reaching out to all people, but He is also holy and righteous and must deal justly with sin. Those who do not want to be with God now will not want to be with Him in eternity. Because He is love, He does not force people to be with Him for eternity but honors their choice. God allows them to exist away from Him in hell. So God does not change; He grants individuals what they desire.

I would also disagree with Bell's statement that God is the one tormenting individuals. Torment comes from within the person. The torment the person experiences is not inflicted by God but comes from the individual who must live eternally with his or her decision to reject the love of God. Therefore hell honors the free choice of men and fulfills the love of God who does not impose Himself on those who do not want Him. It also fulfills His holiness, removing sin from His presence.

## **Another Kind of Heaven and Hell**

To maintain his thesis that everyone will go to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the gospel message, the character of God, and the teaching on heaven and hell. Bell teaches that hell is not eternal but temporary, and in fact heaven and hell are actually the same place. For those who have accepted God's love, this place will be heaven. For those who continue to

reject God's love this place will be hell. Hell is created by the individual who resists God's love. Bell states, "We create hell whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story."[{13}](#) The individual remains in this condition until he is won over by God's love and eventually turns to God. Then what was once hell will become heaven.

Bell derives this from Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, after the younger brother returns, the father throws this formerly lost son a big banquet. However, the older brother, jealous and upset over his younger brother's reception, remains outside and chooses not to enjoy the party. Both brothers are in the same place but for one it is a party, for the other it is miserable.[{14}](#) Bell states that it is our choice. "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both are at the party."[{15}](#) The younger brother who has received his father's love it is a joyous time, but for the older brother who has the wrong view of his father it is misery.

Bell is really stretching the interpretation of this parable to support his theology. I am not aware of any New Testament scholar that finds this doctrine of heaven and hell in this parable. The parable comes in the context of the Pharisees and teachers of the law questioning Jesus associating with "sinners." Jesus, in defense of His ministry and displaying the compassion of God for the lost, tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The younger brother represents the sinners who repent and turn to God while the older brother represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law who have little compassion for the lost.[{16}](#) So the purpose of the parable is God's heart for the lost and the cold heartedness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. To read into this story Bell's doctrine of heaven and hell is a stretch. It does not appear Jesus had in mind any teaching on heaven and hell in this parable.

Bell believes that heaven and hell are actually the same place

and he also believes that hell is not permanent. He describes it as a “period of pruning” and “an intense experience of correction.”[{17}](#) It appears that Bell views hell similar to the Catholic teaching of purgatory. Eventually this will end when the person turns to God because, according to Bell, “No one can resist God’s pursuit forever because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts.”[{18}](#)

Another way Bell defends his doctrine of hell is in doing a brief word study. The Old Testament word is *sheol*. Bell explains that *sheol* is the place of the grave in the Old Testament and that it speaks generally of the resting place of the departed spirits. Three words are used in the New Testament: *gehenna*, *hades*, and *tartarus*. *Gehenna*, he says, is the Valley of Hinnon, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem.[{19}](#) The word *tartarus* comes from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld where Greek demigods were judged.[{20}](#) *Hades*, he states, is the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*, an obscure, dark and murky place.[{21}](#) He thus concludes from his brief word study on hell that hell is not clearly defined in the Bible and that holding to the belief that it is a place of eternal suffering is unjustified.

Bell correctly states that *sheol* is the place of the grave and speaks generally of the place where the departed spirits go. There are several occasions where Old Testament saints stated they would go to *sheol*. However, his word study is incomplete. As revelation progresses, we see there are different fates for the righteous and the wicked. There is indeed a judgment which determines the destiny of individuals.

As mentioned above, Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and a judgment that determines the eternal destiny of individuals. Some will resurrect to eternal life while others to everlasting contempt. As noted earlier,

the Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām*. *Olām* is used more than three hundred times to indicate indefinite continuance into the very distant future. There are times it is used to designate a long period in the past or a designated long period of time in the future.[{22}](#) Context determines the definition. In this context it signifies an indefinite future or forever. This is the most likely definition for several reasons. First, the context found in verses 1 and 2 speaks of the resurrection at the end of the age. This is speaking of the final judgment before the righteous enter into eternity. Second, in verse 3 it is used of the righteous shining forever. Third, it is used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God. "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*." Daniel describes an eternal state of reward and life for the righteous but an eternal state of contempt for the unbelievers.

In Isaiah 66:22-24, Isaiah speaks of the Lord establishing His kingdom and restoring Israel. He concludes saying, "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." Here Isaiah refers to state of eternal torment for those who rebel against the Lord.[{23}](#) Although *sheol* is used of the general resting place of departed spirits, as revelation progresses the Old Testament mentions a different eternal destiny of the righteous and unrighteous. The eternal state is further revealed in the New Testament.

In reference to the New Testament words, the most commonly used word is *Gehenna*. Bell is correct that *Gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnon outside of Jerusalem, but once again his word study is incomplete. *Gehenna* is associated with evil, and, in the context of the New Testament, symbolizes more than just a garbage heap. It served as a physical picture of the

eternal state of suffering.

In Matthew 18:7-9 Jesus states, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." The Greek word for "eternal" is *aiōnios*. This word means "eternal, perpetual to time in its duration, constant, or abiding." When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time.[\[24\]](#) The fire described in verse 8 is an eternal and never-ending fire. In the very next verse Christ states that it is better to enter heaven blind in one eye than "be thrown into the hell (*Gehenna*) of fire." In just the previous verse, the fire of hell was said to be eternal. From the context then we should conclude *Gehenna* is an eternal state, not a temporary one.

In Mark 9:47-48 Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus states that in *Gehenna*, the worm lives eternally and the fire is also eternal. *Gehenna* then is described as an eternal abode.

Jesus further states that the punishment in hell is eternal and not temporary. In Matthew 25:46, the judgment of the sheep and the goats, Jesus states, "And these (the goats) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Bell attempts to show in Matthew 25:46—the separation of the sheep and the goats—that when Jesus said "eternal punishment," he did not mean the punishment was eternal. He writes, "*Aion*, we know, has several meanings. One is 'age' or

‘period of time’; another refers to intensity of experience. The word *kolazo* (punishment) is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish. . . . Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean ‘a period of pruning’ or ‘a time of trimming’ or an intense experience or correction.”[\[25\]](#)

However, I find Bell’s explanation unsatisfactory since the verse states that the goats will “go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life.” Here the eternal life of the believer is seen in contrast with the eternal judgment of the unbeliever. If he is to be consistent, we must interpret that the righteous will not enter into an eternal state of life in the presence of God but a temporary state of life. However, this would not make any sense in this verse. Why should we understand that the word “eternal” for the righteous means everlasting but it is taken to be a temporary state for the unrighteous? Since the righteous enter everlasting life, we should take the preceding phrase that the goats will enter a state of eternal punishment.

Paul writes in 2 Thess. 1:8-9, “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” The words “everlasting destruction,” when used together, refer to an eternal state of punishment. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* states that *Ólethros aiōnios* (destruction everlasting) refers to destruction which is eternal or everlasting. It is destruction or a state which is imposed by God forever. In a similar way the phrase “eternal judgment” used in Heb. 6:2 means an eternal sentence imposed by God. All of these designations of punishment stand in contrast to eternal life as the inherent punishment for those who reject Christ’s salvation in that they will be separated from the life of God which they

rejected. As to the duration of what is designated as *aiōnios* when it comes to punishment, it is only proper to assign it the same duration or endlessness as to the life which is given by God. [\[26\]](#)

Revelation 14:9-11 states, "A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever.'" In this passage the Greek word *aiōnios* is repeated at the end of verse 11. The phrase "forever and ever" is used twelve times in Revelation. Each time it refers to an eternal existence. Eight times it is associated with the nature of God or the never ending rule of God. For example Revelation 4:9-10 says, "And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever." The most consistent interpretation of 14:9-11 is that the suffering of the unbelievers is of an eternal nature.

Jude 7 states, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." Once again the word here is *aiōnios*, signifying an eternal punishment.

It is difficult to interpret passages like these (2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7; and Rev. 14:9-11) to mean something other than eternal or never-ending punishment. Bell's interpretations are incorrect and his word studies are incomplete. When you look at several passages in their context, it is very difficult to support Bell's view.

## How Many Stones Cry Out?

Is Jesus the only way to eternal life or are there other ways to salvation besides Christ? Bell makes his case that there are other ways to eternal life. Bell builds his case from Exodus 17 where Moses struck the rock which brought forth water for the Israelites. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul states that Christ was that rock which Moses struck. Thus, Bell makes the leap that if Christ was in that rock, it is very likely He is in numerous rocks. Bell writes,

According to Paul, Jesus was there. Without anybody using his name. Without anybody saying that it was him. Without anybody acknowledging just what—or more precisely, who—it was. Paul's interpretation that Christ was present in the Exodus raises the question: Where else has Christ been present? When else? Who Else? How else? Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere. [{27}](#)

It appears Bell is stating that one need not know the gospel message of Christ as taught in the New Testament. A person can be saved through other means and messages. Bell further states,

As obvious as it is, then, Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called Christianity. Within this proper larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody. [{28}](#)

Bell emphasizes that he believes that salvation comes through

Jesus and Jesus alone saves all people. He refers to Jesus' words in John 14:6. However, he believes that Jesus may be found in the numerous other religions but identified by different names, symbols, or teachings for Jesus as the creator is present in all creation. Therefore, Christianity does not have the exclusive message of salvation. Other religions contain the presence of Christ through their teachings. How and where they do, Bell does not explain.

Bell states again that specific knowledge of Jesus and the message of the cross is not necessary for salvation. "What he (Jesus) doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him know they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him." [\[29\]](#) So for Bell, salvation is possible without understanding who Jesus is, his atoning work, and the message of the cross.

Bell misunderstands the text of John 14:6 ["I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"]. Jesus states that He is the only way to eternal life. The "mechanism" is faith in Jesus Christ. Truth is found in general revelation, creation, and the conscience. Therefore, truth about God can be found studying nature (Rom. 1) and through the moral law within each one of us (Rom. 2). For this reason, there are teachings that are true in other religions. For example, many ethical systems in the other religions overlap with biblical teachings. So truth that points to God can be found in general revelation, but saving knowledge of Christ is not found in general revelation. Salvation comes through the special revelation of Jesus Christ. For this reason Paul states, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach

unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15) Paul states it is only the specific message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves (Rom. 1:16).

There are several examples in the New Testament that reveal general revelation was not enough for salvation, but special revelation was needed. In Acts 10, Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman soldier, believes in God and lives a noble life. However, that was not enough. For this reason, God sent Peter to present the message of the gospel to Cornelius. After hearing the gospel message, Cornelius and his family receive the gift of salvation. Therefore, the message of the gospel must be heard and received for salvation.

Jesus further taught that the message of salvation is narrow and exclusive. This is not only the nature of the gospel message but the nature of truth itself. If Jesus is the son of God, any religion that rejects this truth must be false in its salvation message. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus stated that the way to eternal life is indeed narrow and only a few find it. Peter reinforced that Jesus is the only way in Acts 4:12, and Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:5 that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. If these statements are true, then salvation comes exclusively through Jesus.

It is also logically unreasonable to assume that salvation is possible through other religions. For example, Islam rejects the deity of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, the resurrection, and salvation by faith in Christ. Many forms of Buddhism reject the idea of a God. Hinduism teaches that Brahma is an impersonal force and is in a codependent relationship with the universe since Brahma is made up of all things. Since the other religions have significant teachings contradictory to Christianity, it is unreasonable to conclude they contain the salvation message of Christ.

So do the stones cry out? There is truth in general revelation

(creation and the conscience) but this truth does not save; it points one to God (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:12-16). Salvation requires the gospel message of Christ as stated by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, that we are sinners, Christ died for our sins and rose triumphing over sin, and we are called to receive Him as our Lord and Savior. Without the gospel message of Christ, one cannot attain salvation.

## Conclusion

Paul warns us very strongly in Galatians 1:8 the danger of preaching another gospel. Unfortunately, Bell here presents another gospel and in doing so, presents a false message of hope that has eternal consequences. In *Love Wins*, Bell argues that in the end everyone will be in heaven because that is God's will. No one can resist God's love forever, and if all are not saved, God is not glorified. However, in changing the gospel message Bell changes the character of God and the nature of heaven and hell. God is a God of love, and in His love He honors the decision of individuals to freely choose Him or reject Him. Those who reject Christ, have not had their sins cleansed and cannot enter into the presence of a holy God. In the end, God upholds His love by honoring the choice of all individuals and upholds his righteousness by placing the righteous in His presence and the unrighteous in hell, away from His holy presence. In the end God wins. That is the message of the cross.

## Notes

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), viii.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., viii.
4. Ibid., 107.
5. Ibid., 107.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Ibid., 150.

8. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A.). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems electronic ed., 2000), 762.
9. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.), (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).
10. Richard Melick, *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 225.
11. Bell, *Love Wins*, 2.
12. Ibid., 172-3.
13. Ibid., 172.
14. Ibid., 170-76.
15. Ibid., 175.
16. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997), 579.
17. Bell, *Love Wins*, 91-2.
18. Ibid., 108.
19. Ibid., 68.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid.
22. A. A. Macrae, "1631 ???," in R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (electronic ed.) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 672.
23. John Walvoord, and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), Is 66:22-24.
24. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
25. Bell, *Love Wins*, 90-1.
26. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
26. Bell, *Love Wins*, 143-4.
28. Ibid., 150.
29. Ibid., 153.

# (Ir)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair

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<sup>[1](#)</sup>. 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 "categorical"). 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."<sup>{4}</sup> 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](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-qgmJ7nzA)
2. Justin Taylor, [thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist](http://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](http://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](http://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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# 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<sup>{1}</sup>. 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<sup>{2}</sup>. 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 "categorical"). 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."<sup>{4}</sup> 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](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-qgmJ7nzA).

2. Justin Taylor, [thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist](http://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](http://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](http://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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# **“What Is Your Position on Universalism?”**

Do you have any information or research on “Christian-Universalism”? Please see the website [www.christian-universalism.com](http://www.christian-universalism.com).

Universalism, in its simplest sense, teaches that at some point all will be saved. The website that you referenced in your email contains many of universalism’s most popular beliefs. However, routinely these views stray from orthodox Christian belief and away from the Bible. In numerous places the Bible refers to a time of judgment where the righteous are granted eternal life and the wicked are given over to eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 16:19-31, Revelation 20:11-15). Furthermore, Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, referred to a place of eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 5:22, 18:8-9, Mark 9:43, 48, Revelation 19:20, 20:10, etc.).

The Bible is very emphatic regarding the doctrine of eternal punishment. Universalism rejects this teaching and replaces it with its own. Below is a website that contains information regarding Universalism. It takes a look at Universalism’s beliefs and teachings and subjects it to the Bible through various word studies and Scripture comparisons. It is a helpful place to start:

[www.carm.org/universalism.htm](http://www.carm.org/universalism.htm)

Hope you find this helpful.

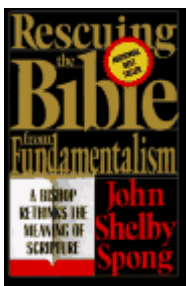
Ryan Holmes

Probe Ministries Intern

# Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

## Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.



Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.<sup>{1}</sup> The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to "be all that one can be."<sup>{2}</sup> Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without "religion." In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of "religious" sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

## **Bishop Spong's View of Scripture**

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong's view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there

is “no such thing as ‘objective history’.”{3} The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, “The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God.”{4} In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that “We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us.”{5} He adds that “We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . .”{6}

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-nine pages of Spong’s “rescuing” focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, “Why bother?” If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what’s in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God’s supernatural interaction or

intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

## **A Sex Driven Gospel**

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.[\[7\]](#) Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a

religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system.”[\[8\]](#) Spong writes, “So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed.” In other words, we are to ignore what Paul actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong’s liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that “They’ve moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They’ve yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we’ve had to face in the developing world.”[\[9\]](#) When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring “I’m not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . .” Spong’s reply doesn’t seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

## Who Is Jesus?

Let’s turn our focus to Spong’s view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ’s authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God’s only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that “the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated.”[\[10\]](#) All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and

eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul “quite obviously was not a trinitarian.”[\[11\]](#) Christ is “the hero of a thousand faces” and “many things to many people.”[\[12\]](#) “All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ.”[\[13\]](#) He adds that, “A Christianity that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying.”[\[14\]](#) What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spong finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is remarkably predictable. He writes, “. . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ.”[\[15\]](#) This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God’s wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a “terrifying, barrier-free love.”[\[16\]](#)

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus’ life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong’s views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is “self-realization.”[\[17\]](#)

# Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.[\[18\]](#) Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."[\[19\]](#) It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is

really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the [Jesus Seminar](#) and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."[\[20\]](#) Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

## Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. [www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329](http://www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329)
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.
19. Ibid.
20. Spong, 4.

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**See Also *Probe Answers Our Email:***

["Bishop Spong is a Hero!"](#)

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# Freemasonry and the Christian Church – Are Masons Christian?

*Russ Wise intently examines the teaching and practices of freemasonry from a Christian, biblical worldview perspective. What he finds clearly shows distinct differences between Freemasonry and Christian doctrine and practice.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

# Freemasonry : Its Background and History

There are probably few subjects as shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding as that of Freemasonry. Known under a variety of names (the Craft, the Brotherhood, the Order, the Fraternal Order, the Lodge, etc.), Masonry has been aligned with both the Christian church and the occult. A major problem for many whether within the Order or without is the question of the Mason's ultimate allegiance. If, in fact, there is no appreciable theological difference between the church and Freemasonry, their antagonists have no basis on which to denounce them. However, if there are beliefs and practices in Masonry that are incompatible with biblical Christianity, then it becomes imperative for the non-Mason and Mason alike to understand the true teachings of the Lodge.

The history of the Lodge is not easily discernible. Along with those who believe that Freemasonry had Christian beginnings are a growing number of Masonic authors who espouse an occultic origin for the Craft. There are those who indicate that the Craft was an outgrowth of the Ancient Mystery Schools or that it was first associated with the Druids or the Illuminati. In order for the individual to make a correct decision regarding Freemasonry, he must first understand the motivation of the author.

Masonic authors Delmar Darrah, A. S. MacBride, and Melvin Johnson point out the unreliability of many of their fellow Masonic writers. Darrah, in his book titled *History And Evolution Of Freemasonry*, states that "Masons have believed the things concerning the origin of the institution that they wanted to believe and have gone forth and told them as facts. When links were missing, they have been supplied by drawing upon fertile imaginations."(1)

# **Christianity and the Craft**

Leading Masonic authorities in the 18th and 19th centuries held a distinctively Christian interpretation of Freemasonry. Such leaders as Rev. James Anderson, William J. Hughan, William Hutchinson, Rev. George Oliver, and others had a Christian view of their Craft.(2) Hutchinson, in particular, noted that Jesus Christ was the example for the Master Mason. He stated, "The Master Mason represents a man under the Christian doctrine saved from the grave of iniquity and raised to the faith of salvation. As the great testimonial that we are risen from the state of corruption, we bear the emblem of the Holy Trinity as the insignia of our vows and of the origin of the Master's order."(3)

## **The Anti-Masonic Movement**

The decade between 1826 and 1836 represented troublesome years for the Masonic Order. After several incidents that cast a negative light on Freemasonry,(4) a growing anti-Masonic sentiment began to emerge. As a result, there was a mass exodus of Christians from the Lodge, thereby creating a vacuum to be filled by those who held a non-Christian view of Masonry. During this time Albert Pike seized the opportunity to spread and entrench his pagan interpretation of the Craft. Pike and others began to reinterpret the symbols of the Craft.

The paganization of the Lodge took place over several decades, but it did not reach public awareness until the latter part of the 19th century. Even so, it was not until the 1920s, when a large number of books began appearing in print that claimed pagan origins for the Craft, that these efforts became widely known.

## **Masonic Universalism**

The anti-Masonic movement dealt Freemasonry a severe blow. However, the exodus of large numbers of Christians proved to

be a stabilizing factor(5) for the non-Christian forces of the Craft. Once the Christian majority had left the Craft, Pike was then able to redesign it in a way that would support his pagan views.

It is interesting to note that during the very time that Pike was heavily involved in his paganizing process, the Craft was experiencing a renewed growth in membership from Christians. The majority of these new Christian members represented church leadership and accepted the Christian interpretation of Hutchinson, Oliver, Hughan, and others. Their influence, however, wasn't enough to offset the growing paganization of the Lodge.

Manly P. Hall, a 33rd degree Mason, was one of the early authors who claimed a pagan origin for Freemasonry. In his book entitled *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, he says that Freemasonry is not a material thing: it is a universal expression of the Divine Wisdom. "The Masonic order is not a mere social organization, but is composed of all those who have banded themselves together to learn and apply the principles of mysticism and the occult rites."(6)

Hall (and a host of other writers including Pike) created a pagan history for Freemasonry that would later take root and grow to become the accepted understanding of Masonic origins. As this new interpretation took hold in the minds of the membership, Christianity was being all but eradicated from the Craft. It became unthinkable to mention the name of Christ or to pray in the name of Jesus. The Craft was set firmly on the ground of "universalism."

The primary standard for membership was, and continues to be, that the candidate believe in "God." This god could be Krishna, Buddha, Allah, or any other god, but Jesus Christ is not to be considered anything more than their equal.

This universalist, or inclusive, idea about God has opened the

door for every false deity to have a place within the Lodge. Hall makes his universalist orientation unmistakable by stating, "The true disciple of Masonry has given up forever the worship of personalities. With his greater insight, he realizes that all forms . . . are of no importance to him compared to the life which is evolving within."(7)

Hall adds to his belief in universalism by stating that "the true Mason is not creed-bound. He realizes with the divine illumination of his lodge that as a Mason his religion must be universal: Christ, Buddha, or Mohammed, the name means little, for he recognizes only the light and not the bearer."(8) So, for the Mason, God is not a personal being, but an impersonal force, an energy that has no substance.

The Mason who is a Christian is put in a very difficult position. Although his Fraternal Order supported his Christianity in its early years, it now no longer allows for it as there is no question about the pagan orientation of Freemasonry in our day. Therefore, the Mason must ask himself whether he can, in good faith, remain a part of an organization that devalues the God of Christianity.

## **Freemasonry as a Religion**

As the evolution of modern Freemasonry took place over a period of several hundred years, it continued to be influenced by those who held an occultic worldview. For them, the Craft was a revival of the ancient mysteries.

Albert Pike, the noted Masonic scholar, said that "it is the universal, eternal, immutable religion, such as God planted it in the heart of universal humanity."(9) Pike's statement is a good example of Masonic double speak. The Christian can interpret what is said as being in reference to the personal God of Christianity who created the universe. However, when one takes Pike's statement together with the balance of his worldview it becomes apparent that he is referring to the

impersonal god of Freemasonry as mentioned earlier.

Pike, in his book *Morals and Dogma*, says this about religion and Freemasonry: "Every Masonic Lodge is a temple of religion; and its teachings are instruction in religion." (10) According to the modern day interpreters of Masonry, it has now taken its logical place as the unifier of all religions. One such interpreter, Foster Bailey, an occultist and a 32nd degree Mason, said that "Masonry is the descendant of a divinely imparted religion" that antedates the prime date of creation. Bailey goes on to say that "Masonry is all that remains to us of the first world religion" which flourished in ancient times. "It was the first unified world religion. Today we are working again towards a world universal religion." (11)

In other words, Freemasonry has its roots in the same sources as the mystery religions of the world that brought on the wrath of the Hebrew God of the Old Testament. And the Craft is now preparing the way for the revival of the same religion of the ancients.

The Mason, however, may be unaware of much of what is taught by the Lodge. The Mason who is uninitiated in the higher degrees is deliberately deceived by his brethren. Pike says that "truth is not for those who are unworthy." He goes on to say that "Masonry jealously conceals its secrets, and intentionally leads conceited interpreters astray." (12)

Hall put it this way: "Spiritual qualities are necessary before the real Masonic secrets can be understood by the brethren themselves." (13) What Hall seems to be saying is that one must reach a certain spiritual level before he can rightly understand the deep symbolic teachings of Freemasonry. As an example, one of the most known symbols for Masonry is the letter "G." Depending on whose interpretation one chooses, this symbol may represent geometry, God, or gnosis. A Christian would obviously interpret the symbol as God, whereas the pagan would see it as knowledge or gnosis.

Albert Pike was even more direct when he stated, "The Blue Degrees are but the outer court of the Temple. Part of the symbols are displayed there to the initiate, but he is intentionally misled by false interpretations. It is not intended that he shall understand them; but it is intended that he shall imagine he understands them. Their true explication is reserved for the Adepts, the Princes of Masonry."(14)

The Mason may unwittingly be a part of the Lodge thinking that it is an extension of his Christian faith, when in fact it may be a "Trojan horse," allowing another god into his soul.

## **The Masonic God**

The god of Freemasonry and the God of the Bible are not one and the same. There is a great difference between the two concepts of God. The Masonic god, "The Great Architect of the Universe" (G.A.O.T.U), is believed to be above all other gods.

According to Albert Pike, all people, regardless of their spiritual orientation, can unite under the "Grand Artificer of the Universe." The Masonic god is all-inclusive and all-embracing. All potential Masons must acknowledge a "God" in order to gain membership in the Lodge, but there is no definite criteria regarding which "God" is implied or what "God" is acceptable.

Pike states that Masonry is the unifier of all religions and that "the Christian, the Hebrew, the Moslem, the Brahmin, the followers of Confucius and Zoroaster, can assemble as brethren and unite in prayer to the one God who is above all the Baalim."(15) In other words, the biblical God is reduced to the level of all the other gods and at the same time rendered as equal with the false gods of those religions. Therefore, Christianity is stripped of its uniqueness as the one true religion that offers humanity its only hope for salvation.

This universal god of Freemasonry is believed by many within the Lodge to be the God of the Bible, but this god is not the triune God of the Christian faith. Freemasonry purposefully diminishes the co-equal and co-eternal status of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. That is, the second and third Persons of the Trinity are placed below God the Father, disallowing the triune nature of the biblical God.

The Masonic god is clearly given a greater position among all other "gods." Albert Pike spoke of "God as being One; Unapproachable, Single, Eternal and Unchanging. . . . There is but one God, infinite and incomprehensible, to whom no human attribute can be properly assigned, even when imagined to be infinite." (16) Therefore, according to Pike, the god of Freemasonry is "Single" in nature and not the triune God of the Bible. Likewise, the Masonic god is unapproachable. He is not a personality that cares for his creation, he is a force a principle.

Manly P. Hall, a 33rd degree Mason, refers to God as being the "Life Principle" that lies within all living things. In a passage quoted earlier, Hall stated, "The true disciple of ancient Masonry has given up forever the worship of personalities. With his greater insight, he realizes that all forms . . . are of no importance to him compared to the life which is evolving within." (17) Hall reveals in this passage that

- The god of Freemasonry is a force resident within all living things, and
- The religion of the Craft is pantheism.

On the other hand, the God of Christianity is transcendent and only becomes resident within the human family, and then only when He is invited to do so. In Masonry, Jesus Christ is not accepted as being "One" with the Father and is not looked to for salvation.

Jesus made his Father's requirements very clear: "It is written, You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only'" (Luke 4:8). The Father says that "you shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him . . . you shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the Lord your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; otherwise the anger of the Lord your God will be kindled against you, and He will wipe you off the face of the earth" (Deut. 6:13-15).

The Mason who professes to be a Christian must decide whom he will serve: the God of the Bible or the god of Freemasonry. He cannot serve them both.

## **The Masonic Jesus**

The central question that every Christian Mason must ask himself is "Who is Jesus Christ according to the Lodge?" Earlier we saw that Albert Pike was greatly influenced by the occult and that he was responsible for the rewriting of the rituals for all the degree work beyond that of Master Mason.

Because of Pike's influence, Freemasonry has adopted a universalist approach toward divinity. According to Jim Shaw, a 33rd degree Mason who left the Lodge, Masonry teaches that "Jesus was just a man. He was one of the exemplars,' one of the great men of the past, but not divine and certainly not the only means of redemption of lost mankind. He was on a level with other great men of the past like Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras and Mohammed. His life and legend were no different from that of Krishna, the Hindu god. He is the son of Joseph,' not the Son of God."(18)

Jesus Christ is not to be looked upon as God incarnate, or as the Savior of humanity, but He is to be considered as no different than any other great spiritual leader or guru. To follow through with this conclusion, the Lodge does not permit the name of Jesus or Christ to be used in any of its prayers

or rituals.

As an example, when Scripture is used in rituals the name of Jesus or Christ is omitted lest it offend someone. In essence, the Lodge has rewritten Scripture to suit its own end. The Bible is clear in its warning that God's Word is not to be changed or tampered with. Deuteronomy 4:2 says, "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it."

Masonic prayers are not to include the name of Jesus Christ, but they are to refer to the Great Architect of the Universe. The *Maryland Master Mason* magazine offered this statement concerning prayer in the Lodge: "All prayers in Mason lodges should be directed to the one deity to whom all Masons refer to as the Grand Architect of the Universe."(19)

For the Christian, this idea should cause some real concern. The Bible is clear regarding what Jesus says to those who are ashamed of the Son. "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."(20)

The biblical Jesus does not allow for the bias of Freemasonry when it comes to receiving His proper place of reverence and worship. In short, Jesus does not seem to be as tolerant as the Mason when it comes to His divine authority.

The Bible gives us further instruction regarding our response to the Christian faith. "And Jesus came up to them, saying, All authority has been given me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you'" (Matt. 28: 18-20).

The Mason is thus faced with the choice of whom he will serve: Jesus, the Savior of his soul, or the tolerant god of

Freemasonry who leads him to destruction.

## **Masonic Light and Darkness**

“Freemasons are emphatically called the Sons of Light, because they are in possession of the true meaning of the symbol; while the profane or uninitiated who have not received this knowledge are said to be in darkness.”(21) In other words, the Mason has been delivered from the darkness into the light and is elevated above those who have not received the initiation into the degrees and mysteries of Freemasonry.

The “profane” individual, or the non-Mason, remains in darkness and is in need of light. The Mason, after being enlightened, continues to be in need of more light. It seems that the Mason never comes to fully understand his Craft and all that it means. However, as the Mason gains more light and understanding of the various symbols representing each degree, he becomes more aware of its different meanings. Albert Pike, the Masonic scholar, speaks of this deception, “Masonry conceals its secrets from all except Adepts and Sages, or the Elect, and uses false explanations and misinterpretations of its symbols to mislead those who deserve only to be misled; to conceal the Truth, which it calls Light, from them, and to draw them away from it. Truth is not for those who are unworthy or unable to receive it, or would pervert it. So Masonry jealously conceals its secrets, and intentionally leads conceited interpreters astray.”(22)

According to Pike, “Masonry is a search after light.”(23) The question that one must ask oneself is, What is the source of this “Light” that contemporary Freemasonry is based on? Pike goes on to tell us that the light of Masonry is based on the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. For the Christian this is indeed a difficulty, because the Christian cannot accept the occult beliefs of the mystics. The Bible tells us that “truth” or “light” can only be found in God’s Word.

The Mason is taught that as he receives more light he grows in perfection. As he grows in perfection, he believes that he actually increases his personal worthiness and, in the process, gains a deeper appreciation of Masonry. This in-depth understanding leads to a greater degree of enlightenment and enables the Mason to feel as if he has done all he must do for acceptance into the Grand Lodge above. This appeal to human pride is a deadly trap because we all have a sin nature and want to feel that we have "earned" salvation and "deserve" it.

However, the Mason who professes Jesus Christ as his Lord is left in a very difficult position by the Lodge. The Lodge considers the Christian as being profane or unworthy to receive the "Light" of the Craft. The Mason is faced with this dilemma: if the Lodge has the Light that mankind is looking for and if Jesus is that Light, how is it then that Jesus is not to be mentioned in the Lodge if He is indeed the Light of the world?(24) This idea becomes increasingly difficult when the Christian attempts to reconcile what the Bible says regarding Jesus and what the Craft says about the presence of Jesus in the Lodge.

Albert Pike speaks of Lucifer as the Light-bearer! "Lucifer, the Son of the Morning! Is it he who bears the Light, and with its splendors intolerable blinds feeble, sensual, or selfish Souls?"(25) The Bible identifies Lucifer as being Satan and an angel of light. According to Paganism, Lucifer is the bearer of the light that enlightens man's understanding of his Higher Self or his "God Self." Masonic author Foster Bailey says it this way, "Masonry therefore, is not only a system of morality, inculcating the highest ethics through which result, if followed, the conscious unfolding of divinity. . . . It portrays the recovery of man's hidden divinity and its bringing forth into the light . . . the power to achieve perfection latent in every man." Masonry purports to be the Light that awakens man's mind to his perfection and ultimate divinity.

The question that begs to be answered by each Mason is simply this: "Which Light' will he follow, the true Light of Christ or the dimly lit light of the Lodge?"

## **The Hidden Things of Freemasonry**

There is a great deal of secrecy in Freemasonry. From the very beginning the Entered Apprentice is kept in the shadows regarding the full meaning of the symbols of the Craft. He is not offered any further understanding until he has proven himself worthy to receive deeper truths.

Not only is the Mason to keep the secrets of the Lodge, but he is to swear oaths accompanied by severe penalties if he ever chooses to reveal them. According to Carl H. Claudy, a former Grand Master of Masons, the Masonic penalties are intended to inspire terror in the candidate. Claudy says that if a candidate breaks his oath, he will experience the abasement that any man would feel when he had broken a solemn pledge. But even more so, he would experience "the wrath of God blasphemed. The horror of a sin of which there is none greater."(26)

The above statement is an example of the misinformation that the Mason often labors under. The idea that God recognizes and upholds the Mason's oath to a pagan god is simply not biblical. However, the biblical mandate for the believer is to "swear not at all . . . But let your Yes' be Yes,' and your No, 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."(27) In other words, the Lord makes it very clear that anything sworn other than yes' or no' is from the mouth of the Devil.

The Christian God is not a god of fear and misery, but He is a God of compassion and mercy. Masonic author and 33rd Degree Mason Manly P. Hall identifies the nature of the cosmic force to which the Mason owes his allegiance. He states that "the average Mason, as well as the modern student of Masonic

ideals, little realizes the cosmic obligation he takes upon himself when he begins his search for the sacred truths of Nature. . . . Every Mason knows that a broken vow brings with it a terrible penalty. . . . When a Mason swears that he will devote his life to (Masonry) . . . and then defiles his living temple . . . he is breaking a vow which imposes not hours but ages of misery.”(28) The Mason is not offering his loyalty to the God of Christianity, but to the pantheistic god of Nature.

Albert Mackey, author of the *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, offers several reasons why non-Masons object to Masonic secrecy. However, there are only four which he accepts as being true. First, it is an oath. Second, it is administered before the secrets are communicated. Third, it is accompanied by certain superstitious ceremonies. And fourth, it is attended by a penalty.(29)

The candidate is led to believe that the penalties accompanying the oaths that he swears to are indeed carried out. At no time is he told that these penalties are simply symbolic. Mackey states that the penalties are not to be inflicted by the Lodge but by God. He says that “the ritualistic penalties of Freemasonry . . . are in the hands not of man, but of God, and are to be inflicted by God, and not by man.”(30) The Lodge is standing on thin ice when it presumes that God will safeguard its paganism by putting its detractors to death.

The greatest problem for the Christian Mason is that by taking the oaths of the Craft, and living his life according to them, he has opened the door to Lucifer to steal his relationship with the living God.

## **Symbolism and Freemasonry**

“In all time, truth has been hidden under symbols, and often under a succession of allegories: where veil after veil had to be penetrated before the true Light was reached, and the

essential truth stood revealed.”(31) These words of Albert Pike, the noted Masonic scholar, sound noble and true. However, the Christian must weigh Pike’s lofty words with the Scripture.

Our Lord was, at all times, eager to help his disciples recognize the truth of His teachings. The only problem they had to overcome was their lack of spiritual understanding. The gospel writer of Matthew 7 tells us that all we must do, is simply ask. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”(32) The Lord desires to draw us near to Himself. We do not have to pass through veil after veil to reach divine understanding. He has readily given it to us in His Word. According to Dr. Robert A. Morey’s research, “there were no degrees in Masonry two hundred years ago; and that the Master’s degree is no more than 150 years of age.” He goes on to say that “most Masonic historians now admit that it was the Frenchmen Desaguilliers or Dr. Anderson who invented the first three degrees. The few symbols introduced by these two Christian clergymen came from the Bible and were Christian’ in every sense.”(33) Here again we see that the origins of the Craft were rooted in Christian belief.

However, as we have seen earlier, the Craft has undergone a paganization process by those who would subvert it to their own use. Whereas, in the early years of the Lodge, the symbols that were introduced revealed truth, in the present, those very same symbols and hundreds of others are used to mislead the candidate. Albert Pike made it clear when he stated, “part of the symbols are displayed . . . to the initiate, but he is

intentionally misled by false interpretations.”(34)

Jesus taught in parables and made use of symbols in His instruction. He freely offered understanding, and He was quick to help others recognize His Father. But when we look at Freemasonry we find secrecy and the “truth” concealed. A person must prove himself worthy in order for the “Light” to be shared with him. And when it is made known to the initiate, this “truth” is often hidden further in false interpretations.

Masonry has numerous symbols. For the Christian, Masonry utilizes the Bible as one of its symbols as it uses the Koran, the Vedas, the Gita, or any other “holy” book. When the Christian candidate sees the Bible on the Masonic altar and hears the Bible referenced to in the rituals, he assumes that Freemasonry is indeed Christian as he has, most likely, been told. However, the Bible is seen only as a symbol by the Lodge, as are all the other “holy” books of other religions.

This attitude toward the Bible makes it clear that, for Masonry, the Bible is not seen as being inspired by God, useable for reproof, correction, or training in righteousness. Rather, it “is only a symbol of Divine Will, Law, or Revelation.”(35)

## **Salvation in the Lodge**

“This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”(36)

The early Masons followed a biblical understanding of salvation and what it meant to be a Christian. However, the pagan writers who rewrote the Masonic rituals omitted the references to biblical salvation and wrote them in a way that would not offend anyone of another religion.

The early rituals for the Master Mason Degree were Christian

in their overall meaning. According to Dr. Morey, biblical phrases such as "regeneration," "redemption," and "heaven" were used without question.(37)

The greatest issue for the Mason, at present, is whether he will accept the life and work of Jesus Christ for his redemption or whether he will look to himself for personal salvation. Manly P. Hall says that "a Mason is evolved through ages of self- purification and spiritual transmutation."(38) So, the modern Mason, who follows the Fraternity's writings, looks to himself for purification and acceptance before a righteous God. Hall says elsewhere that the Master Mason's "spiritual light is greater because he has evolved a higher vehicle for its expression."(39)

Foster Bailey, the author of *The Spirit of Masonry*, says that "Masonry is one of many ways to God" and that Masonry "is not only a system of morality, inculcating the highest ethics through which result, if followed, the conscious unfolding of divinity, but it is also a dramatic presentation of regeneration."(40)

In other words, Bailey is saying that Masonry is a vehicle for mankind to discover his divinity and achieve personal regeneration. This idea is totally foreign to the Bible. The Christian cannot, in any way, get beyond the fact that Jesus Christ as the Light giver and redeemer of humanity is opposed to the teachings of the Lodge.

The Bible distinctly teaches that salvation only comes through the person of Jesus Christ. It cannot come by any other means. The Scripture is clear that if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, we will receive salvation. It is not based upon our works or deeds; it is solely based upon what Jesus did on the cross.

Masonry does not accept the fact that man is born sinful and

is in need of redemption. The Craft does not have a grasp of the depth of man's rebellion against his Creator. Masonic author H. L. Haywood in his book, *The Great Teachings of Masonry*, states that "many think that man was once a perfect being but that through some unimaginable moral catastrophe he became corrupt unto the last moral fiber of his being, so that, without some kind of supernatural or miraculous help from outside him, he can never be saved."(41)

Because Masonry does not have an understanding of the serious nature of man's separation from God, it cannot offer a suitable solution to his problem. The Bible tells us that man is in a state of separation from God and that he is in need of a savior. The Gospel writer of Mark speaks of the fallen nature of humanity. The Scripture says that it is what comes out of man that defiles him. "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, adulteries, thefts, murders, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man."(42) Freemasonry cannot offer mankind an adequate solution to his problem of sin.

## **A Christian Response to Freemasonry**

I recall the words of my father when I first spoke to him about his involvement in Freemasonry. He told me that the Lodge taught that "once a Mason, always a Mason." Even as a senior citizen, that idea continued to have a definite hold on his thinking. My father, as a Christian, had not been able to see the vast difference between the teaching of the Church and that of the Lodge.

Once I was able to share the teaching of the Lodge with him, he was then able to make a clear decision regarding his future with the Fraternity. But, even after he had left the Lodge, he was unable to mentally sever the tie that bound him to the Lodge; he still felt the tug: "Once a Mason, always a Mason."

The Mason falls within one of four categories regarding his continued relationship with the Lodge.(43) First, there are some who do not have a clear knowledge of Christianity. They believe that religion and Christianity are the same and that if someone uses the Scriptures, that person must be a Christian. Such people are sincere but untaught. Because they do not know what Christianity teaches, they see nothing wrong with Freemasonry.

A second category would be those who do not know what Masonry is and what it teaches. They are not only uninformed about Christianity but are equally uninformed about the teachings of Freemasonry. These individuals are without any theological foundation on which to discern truth from error. Likewise, they are often ignorant of the occult direction the Lodge has taken over the past few decades.

A third group is made up of individuals who profess Christ, yet continue as Masons regardless of how much they know about Christianity and Freemasonry. They are indeed in a state of rebellion and have chosen not to follow the truth of Christ.

The final group are those who profess Christ and yet have abandoned the Christian faith. Those who have embraced this position are essentially Unitarian in their belief. They no longer hold to the absolute deity of Christ or His blood atonement.

For the most part, all Masons fall into one of these categories. In some cases, it may be that the blame is not to be laid on the individual but on the Christian church for not adequately teaching its truths. The Mason has a choice to make, but the church has a responsibility to equip its people with the truths of the faith.

Jesus made it quite clear in the Scripture. He said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you

abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.”(44) It is difficult for the Mason to abide in Christ as long as he remains in the Lodge and follows its teachings. It is impossible to bear fruit apart from Jesus. He alone is the one who brings the fruit forth.

It is imperative for the Christian to deal with the question of obedience. It is impossible to serve two masters without loving one and despising the other. The root problem is often the fact that the individual has not been spiritually reborn. Once again Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God . . . you must be born again.”(45)

## Notes

1. Delmar D. Darrah, *History and Evolution of Freemasonry* (Chicago: Charles T. Powner, 1979), 207.
2. Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (Chicago: The Masonic History Co., 1946), 734.
3. Albert A. Mackey, *History of Freemasonry*, vol. I (New York: The Masonic History Co. 1898): 136.
4. One such incident was the brutal murder of William Morgan in 1826. He had made it known that he intended to write a book exposing the secrets of the Lodge.
5. Albert Pike, *Morals And Dogma* (Charleston, S. C.: The Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of the U.S.A., 1950), 814.
6. Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, (Richmond, Va.: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1976), 11-19.
7. Ibid., 64; Foster Bailey, *The Spirit of Masonry*, (New York: Lucis Publishing Co., 1979), 109.

8. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, 65.
9. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 219.
10. Ibid., 213.
11. Bailey, *The Spirit of Masonry*, 29.
12. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 105.
13. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, 69.
14. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 819.
15. Ibid., 226.
16. *Little Masonic Library*, vol. 5 (Richmond, Va.: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1977): 51.
17. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, 64.
18. Jim Shaw, *The Deadly Deception* (Lafayette, La.: Huntington House, Inc., 1988), 126-27.
19. *Maryland Master Mason* magazine (March 1973), vol. 2.
20. Matthew 10:32-33.
21. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, 594.
22. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 104-5.
23. Ibid., 741.
24. See John 8:12 and 1 John 1:5.
25. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 321; 2 Corinthians 11:14.
26. Carl H. Claudy, *Foreign Countries: A Gateway to the Interpretation and Development of Certain Symbols of Freemasonry* (Richmond, Va.: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1971), 90.

27. See Matthew 5:34-37 and James 5:12.
28. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, 11,68.
29. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, 760.
30. Ibid.
31. Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, 248.
32. Matthew 7:7-12.
33. Robert A. Morey, *The Origins and Teachings of Freemasonry* (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1990), 76.
34. Pike, *Morals And Dogma*, 819.
35. Henry Wilson Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macoy, 1961), 520.
36. Acts 4:11-12.
37. Morey, *The Origins And Teachings of Freemasonry*, 113.
38. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, 71-72.
39. Ibid., 54.
40. Bailey, *The Spirit of Masonry*, 105,140.
41. H. L. Haywood, *The Great Teachings of Masonry* (Richmond, Va.: Macoy, 1971), 138.
42. Mark 7:20-23.
43. Alva J. McClain, *Freemasonry and Christianity* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1983), 32-35.
44. John 15:4-5.
45. John 3:5.