

Love Wins: A Conversation on Rob Bell's New Book

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RAM: Thank you for coming. As we are gathered together and about to begin a conversation, I'm going to ask Dr. Russell Moore to lead us in prayer.

RDM: Let's pray. Holy Father, we pray today as we gather here to talk about this issue that you would protect us. Father, we pray that the things that we say today would not come out of a spirit of carnality, but Father, would instead point to your Spirit, the Spirit of truth. Father, we pray that today as we think through these issues that what we talk about would be of great benefit in your mission to see men and women and boys and girls come to faith in Jesus Christ and that your church would be built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

RAM: We welcome you today those of you who are here on the campus of Southern Seminary and also those who are joining us by means of the Internet and other technology. We think this is an important conversation to have. We're never going to be able to look back and say that our times were boring. There is, it seems, no shortage of issues that demand our attention and should prompt the right kind of good constructive conversation among Christians. Within the world of evangelical Christianity there are a number of issues that are perennial and seem always to be a part of the discussion and then there are new issues that arise from time to time. We still live in an age, and I think this is interesting to know, when books matter. We are talking today about a book and an argument that is made within that book. And it is really a book that demands, because its argument demands some very careful thinking on our part. I'm glad to be joined on this panel by several who have a lot to contribute to this conversation. Joining us today is Justin Taylor, who has been an associate publisher at Crossway Books since 2006. He's best known for his blog, which many of you read daily, "Between Two Worlds." He was project director and managing director for the English Standard Version Study Bible in addition to editing and contributing to several books, including *A God-Entranced Vision of all Things* and *Reclaiming the Center*. And he also runs the Web site, [johnowen.org](http://johnowen.org). Prior to his work with Crossway Books, he worked at Desiring God Ministries in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Denny Burk is dean of Boyce College and is well known to the Southern Seminary community. He's an apologist, a popular speaker, he works in the area at the intersection of Christianity and culture and he also writes and you know him from his blog, [dennyburk.com](http://dennyburk.com). Dr. Russell Moore is dean of the School of Theology and senior vice president for Academic Administration at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, published author, wily soft speaker, and someone else you know because of his willingness to address contemporary issues and the wisdom that he

brings and it is a real joy to welcome each of you to this conversation. I think one of the most important things we can establish at the beginning is why we are doing this and there's a story here as there is in so many cases, and in this case it's the story of the publicity about a book that became an issue of conversation even before the book. Justin, one of the reasons I wanted you to be here was because it was you, along with others who really, early on, brought the publicity to our attention. How did that happen? What is that all about?

JT: It was a month or so ago that somebody sent me the back cover copy, the publisher description from Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, and the person who sent it to me asked, "Is this, this sure sounds like universalism." And as I am was to do, I fired up a blog post and was going to post it and say, you know, is Rob Bell a universalist? But I, having worked in the publishing industry for a few years now, I know that you can't entirely trust the back cover copy. So I decided just to hold that and to wait and then on February 26th, actually Owen Strachan of Boyce College sent me a note, along with some others, with the video, the promotional video, that Harper Collins and Rob Bell did together, which turns out to be from the preface to the book, raising certain questions in a way that, to me confirmed that this certainly sounds like universalism and is moving his ministry and his theology in an alarming direction. And so I put a blog post up and lamented where it seemed like he was going but also expressed thankfulness that he appears to be laying his cards on the table and I would rather know what somebody actually believes and have them come out clean rather than just hide behind an ambiguous language and from there it just, maybe a firestorm or a tsunami is the best way to describe what happened as a result.

RAM: You know you look at that and what's interesting to me is that we began this conversation, talking about advertising for a book, and in terms of advertising this was very well done, tantalizing. I called it a theological strip-tease as a matter of fact, because it was done with such tremendous effect. One of the things you have to say about Rob Bell is that he really knows how to communicate, especially by video, and Denny, you know when that video hit the video is a thing unto itself, talk about that for a minute.

DB: Well, it absolutely is. And as he said (gestures towards JT) the biggest piece of it was a part of the preface of the book, which is a series of questions, and the reason that people thought it was ambiguous was because it was delivered as questions but as you watch closely on the video, they were leading questions, they were rhetorical questions, they were actually assertions, it sounded, to most people that watched it, and now that the book has come out I think that it's been confirmed that that's exactly what it was. But when it first came out I saw the questions and just on my blog, I just wrote my own answers to each of the questions, putting in what I thought the Biblical answer would be. But those questions were what set this off.

RAM: Russ, those questions are not new questions.

RDM: No.

RAM: They've been asked by people inside and outside the church virtually from the beginning. But I thought he asked the question in a very unique way, and this is where I think Denny's right when he says that it really took on more of an assertion. It seemed to me the video left us with the belief that what Rob Bell was arguing, just in the video, we didn't have the book yet, was that if Gandhi is in hell, then God can't be trusted.

RDM: Right. Or that the suggestion that that kind of God would be an evil God, which is even worse. And the way he's wording these questions in terms of publicizing this book, of course, is the way that he has been doing Nooma videos all along, these questions that are brought forward and it's kind of a Socratic way of moving and so it really wasn't fair for so many people to say, "Well you can't judge what Rob Bell is doing", on the basis of raising these questions, I mean the very idea of raising questions against the character of the God who has been believed by every generation of the Christian church, in this way, and to leave it hanging. Even if he had then come back to say, "oh but all of my answers are biblical orthodoxy here," it still would have been an irresponsible thing to do.

RAM: Well I think that that was the big point in the beginning and I wrote my own article first, clearly saying I'm going to deal with the publicity because that's what we've got. But the publicity insinuates things about God that really can't be taken back even if the book came out and resounded with orthodoxy like Athanasius, it left ideas there. So before we actually get to the book, let's just talk for a moment. We're published authors. We want attention for our books. We write because we want to communicate, we want people to hear, and we make arguments that we hope will be convincing. I guess one thing that's kind of chafing to me in this whole thing, before we ever get to the book itself is that we're really responsible for the publicity of our book and for the way we tell people what the book is all about. It seems to me that's an important part of this. You're in the publishing industry, Justin, does that make sense?

JT: It absolutely does. We have an obligation first and foremost as children of God, standing before God to be responsible with our words. We'll be judged on the judgment day for every careless word that comes out of our mouth. Secondly somebody like Rob Bell and like us, we're in Christian leadership, we're involved with the people of God and there's a responsibility to protect your flock and to love your people. And so you're exactly right. Even if Rob Bell were to come out and produce an entirely orthodox book, which he didn't, the strategy, the publicity strategy was cynical. It was designed to raise questions and doubts in people's minds, and there's no doubt that that's what Rob Bell and his creative rhetoric sought to accomplish, to plant that seed of doubt in your mind

that what you know about God is not in fact actually true, and we do want attention for our books and for our ministry and things we labor at but not at all costs.

RAM: You know you mentioned the Socratic Method. There are different ways to approach that. You can ask questions because you are headed to an answer, or you can ask questions as a teacher or speaker in a way of kind of letting the questions hang there. Early on I thought that Rob Bell might be doing the latter, he might be kind of asking the questions to let them hang out there, but the book, in fact he says in there, this book is not only about the questions, it's about the answers. Russ, talk about the ethics of the question just for a moment. You know there are ways we can ask questions that are actually subversive.

RDM: Well and we have seen this just in recent years before, Brian McLaren followed this same trajectory, at first simply saying I'm just asking these questions, I'm just raising these issues, I'm not providing an answer here, I'm just saying these are the kinds of things that Christians ought to talk about and Rob Bell of course has had hints of these kinds of questions in previous books and in previous statements. Now moving toward another level of clarity, to me I think the issue is this seems to me to be a kind of subtly of speech that the apostle Paul forbids us to use. Second Corinthians 5 when he says we don't speak in that way, we lay openly what it is that we believe. And so often I think you see questions in Scripture used in two different ways. Jesus uses questions but Jesus uses questions in such a way that the answer is illuminated by the question. John the Baptist, was his baptism from heaven or from man? Immediately the issues now are being clarified as opposed to "has God really said?" or the kinds of questions that are instead there to confuse and there to darken. And so I think hiding behind questions when you don't want to say what it is that you believe is not a Christ-like approach to questioning.

RAM: Rob Bell is not a stranger to us in terms of his public ministry and you look at the ministry there in Grand Rapids, the Mars Hill Bible Church and the Nooma videos and all the rest, here's a man who has a pretty massive public influence. That comes with a stewardship ... doesn't have any public influence, there's a stewardship with that influence. In my engagement with this book as in my engagement with the larger questioning of the emerging church, I want to make the point that I am not questioning their motivation, that what they feel like what they are trying to do. What we have to deal with is the message and the product and then we can make inferences backwards from that, but when I actually got the book and was able to read the book and I was not going to talk about it until I had read it, and to make sure that I didn't miss anything I read it again. Well, there's a lot of white space in it. It doesn't take you a long time to read it, but it does take you a while to make sure you're catching the subtleties of what he's doing and not doing. I think any of us have to agree there are parts of the book with which we would agree. There are arguments in the book that we would resonate with and I think it gets to the larger issue that when we read a lot of the criticisms offered by

the emerging church leaders of evangelicalism we see many of the same problems. Let's talk about that for a moment, what's the case for what's found in the book? Justin?

JT: Well I think one of the common grounds we would have with Rob Bell is that he says these issues ultimately boil down to who is God? And I think that's something that everybody can say. We agree that this is about the character of God and who he is revealed himself to be and we are going to come to very different answers but that is the question at the end of the day. And I think you're right, Rob Bell and others are raising some legitimate issues. For example the theology that we're only living for heaven and we don't care about what happens here on earth, and ignoring justice issues, and ignoring the extravagant reality of God's love that is hard to define, it's hard to contain. He's tapping into some things all of us feel naturally and wonder about, so it's not necessarily all the questions that he's raising aren't the problem it's when he gets to the answers that we start to have our differences.

RAM: He says some things, Denny, that I certainly agree with when he suggests that many Christians misunderstand the question of hell.

DB: Oh, absolutely, well he pokes holes, for instance, in the popular misconception that heaven is a place that we go to and we're disembodied spirits forever. Okay? And so there's a lot, that's a popular belief among Christians, that you die and your body goes away, and it's just there in the ground forever, and you're like Casper the Friendly Ghost forever. He says that's the wrong view. Heaven comes to earth, there's sort of a new creation and there's a resurrection, even, a resurrection of the body. So all of that is in there but what he does with the resurrected state is so unrecognizably, it's just not biblical.

RAM: We'll get to that.

DB: So, he pokes holes in things that we would want to poke holes in as well...

RAM: Right.

DB: ... but we don't agree with the solutions to it. But the fundamental thing, he has corrected the video, he's corrected the preface, the fundamental thing is what the question behind the question, he said is "Who is this God?" And they are radically different gods, the god he is portraying and the God of orthodoxy.

RAM: Russ, he makes the point that a lot of Christians talk about how to get into heaven using language that previous generations of Christians wouldn't even understand. You know if someone says oh it's just having a personal relationship with Jesus, it's x or y. Some of that can be clarified.

RDM: Oh sure. He talks about inviting Jesus into him, into his heart and that when he did this as a child the kind of language that was there no other generation of Christians would

talk about a personal relationship with Jesus or about inviting Jesus into your heart. When in reality I think that what he's doing is he's taking a caricature and a misunderstanding but making it seem as though Orthodox Christianity is saying you must use this language. When in reality whether you're comfortable with that language or not, no one has ever suggested that this kind of language is actually what saves you. Instead it's that having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is what saves you, having Christ in your life is what saves you. So I think he's hitting a caricature there but it's a caricature that some people may believe, and so it resonates, with people. The same thing I think is true, when he gets at where I think he is right in the book and I think every false argument always is partly right or else it's not dangerous at all. Where he is right is to say there are many Christians who do not understand that God is love. And so they have an understanding of God that actually is rage. So you have some people who may, I heard a youth speaker one time say, "You know how it is when you're really really mad at your friend but you don't want to hit him at school, so you hit your locker instead. That's what God did; he hit Jesus instead of you." Well that's not the gospel of Jesus Christ, that's not what Christian Orthodoxy holds, but there are some people who perhaps understand God as being against them, Jesus being for them, and the Father and the Son, the Son is protecting us from the Father. That's true, that's not Christian Orthodoxy and so that has to be blown away, the Father sends the Son for us. But he takes those caricatures and those misperceptions and then makes them to be the reality that he's fighting against in evangelical orthodoxy. That's what I don't think is fair.

RAM: Yeah, I think one of the things we need to get out in front of us here is that there is plenty to criticize in terms of evangelical superficiality, evangelical confusion, the influence of very unbiblical ideas about heaven, hell, God, Christ, salvation, that are perpetually temptations to the church and I think Rob Bell would have done a tremendous service to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, had he raised some of these questions and addressed them saying here are many misunderstandings and on the basis of Scripture, here's how we clarify them in ways that are authentically true to the totality, the biblical revelation and to the Gospel story and to the narrative of the Gospel as it's revealed. There's so much to talk about here but I want to shift to ask the question, and I'm really looking forward to this set of responses. What is Rob Bell's central argument in this book? I'd just love to hear from each of you, what is the central argument?

JT: I think the central argument, and you all will probably be able to state it better than I will, about that God has one attribute, conceived, according to Rob Bell's conception of love, and that is that God is love. He forgives everybody. Everybody is already accepted and the divide in humanity is whether or not you recognize that, and we can maybe talk about this later, I think it's incoherent of whether or not he thinks everybody actually will be saved, or whether he allows for freedom. But the whole point is not that you

need to be forgiven by God, but that you already are forgiven, so that even if you go into this quasi-hell of your own making, there's still plenty of time, plenty of room for you to have the gates of heaven open to you and to end up in the presence of God. But I think at the end of the day, it's a one dimensional view of God shrunk down to the size of Rob Bell's own creative mind that really misses, fundamentally misses the Gospel story. From Genesis to Revelation, it just misses the holiness of the Creator, God, the sinfulness of the fall of man, the accomplishment of what Christ did, and what the final state will be, that there are only two states.

DB: I think you can say it both positively and negatively. Number one, that God is love, and then negatively, he says that over and over this way in the book, he's not a God of wrath. There is no, finally, any punitive, retributive justice from God. He even says the people who go to hell, his redefined sense of hell, it's really a place of remediation, it's almost like a purgatory, a place purging for sins, and he says the reproofs that are there are reproofs for correction. And so the flip side of God is love, is that he is not wrath, and that he has not committed himself to a holiness that must see every sin punished.

DB: ... It's really a place of remediation. It's almost like a purgatory, a place of purging for sins, and he says the reproofs that are there are reproofs for correction. And so the flip side of God is love is that he is not wrath and that he has not committed himself to a holiness that must see every sin punished. And so Paul says in Romans 12:19, leave room for the wrath of God. And one of the fundamental errors, I think, of his book is right there. There is no room for the wrath of God in his theology.

RDM: I think the central theme is missional. I think he sees himself as being evangelistic because he's saying there's a problem, people can't receive the God that we're talking about. I think the key passage in the entire book is when Bell says, "If something is wrong with your god, if your god is loving one second and cruel the next, if your god will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years, no amount of clever marketing or compelling language or good music or great coffee will be able to disguise that one true, glaring, untenable, unacceptable awful reality." I think that's what he's trying to address, he believes he's making Christianity safe for people to accept, which as you mentioned in your commentary this morning is precisely what this project always is about, at least at first. Let's remove what is offensive and scandalous so that we can reach people so that they can become Christians. And I think that's what he believes himself to be about.

RAM: You know I thought about different ways to describe the book. One of the ways I thought of describing it was velvet hell. Just because there's kind of a cushioning of the whole idea and I thought, you know, if there's another way to summarize his argument, I think I'm being fair in this, and I just felt like every page he was trying to say "it's ok". It's okay. There's a sense in which we desperately want to say that. But the question becomes, on what basis can you say it's okay? Because so many of the things he says

about God's promises to us, are just so absolutely true and precious, but they're true only in Christ. And the great question that the Bible does answer is how those promises become true for us. It's just impossible for me to imagine the apostle Paul standing at Mars Hill just saying it's okay. And that's profoundly not what Jesus said. Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ things are made right, and on the other side of the atonement he accomplished, all is well, but the question is how does that become true for me? And that's where I think the central argument of this book heads exactly in the wrong direction. But we need to look at the actual way the argument is laid out. The preface to the book, the opening section, much like the video, raises questions that insinuate certain issues about the character of God, about the power of God, about the reality of heaven and hell, but there are certain, but very few, absolute affirmations that Rob Bell makes in this book. There are a lot of suggestions, and one of the theological methods I would suggest to the emerging church is the theology by suggestion, the suggestive mode of theological argument. And we'll have to deal with some of those suggestions, but I want you to check me on this. It seems to me that he says there are two absolutes, and actually even in the grammatical way he expresses them I found two very clear absolutes. One of them is that God is love, and the second is that we have total freedom. Is it fair, you think, in terms of my reading of the book that those two issues are held out as absolutes?

DB: Absolutely. In this age and in the next. You have absolute freedom once you pass on into the next age even if you go to hell you can choose to come out of it, and so, and I God does not let you choose in that way then he is not loving. Because libertarian free will has to exist even in the age that ... not loving, without free creatures.

RAM: Well let's deal with the first of those affirmations. Before we get to heaven and how anyone receives those benefits, before we get to hell and anyone avoids that great threat, then let's talk about that first affirmation: God is love. He begins with that, that clearly is his assumption and that's where he ends, and when he says love wins, that's really what he's talking about. He's talking about the fact that God is love. Russ, we believe that God is love.

RDM: Certainly.

RAM: Flesh that out a little bit.

RDM: Well, where the chief assertion, God is love, is found of course is in first John where John is also saying God is light and in him is no darkness at all. John is also warning that there is a spirit of Christ and there's a spirit of anti-Christ. John is also warning that the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one, and John is also warning little children keep yourselves from idols. There's danger here. So apparently the apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, doesn't see a distinction between a God who is love and a God who is just. As a matter of fact, that's what the entire New Testament,

for the most part, is about, is how do you reconcile God's love and God's justice, and it's found in the cross. That's where I think he veers off; it seems to me he's defining God by love rather than by defining love by God. And of course John does it the other way, here in is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. He wants to reverse that in such a way that we're able to say since we know this is what love is, then God must be this. And he does that with, for instance by saying, you know if God is our Father, if any of us were to beat our children forever, you know, that person would be arrested. We know that's not loving, and so that's the perspective I think he's coming from.

RAM: Yeah let's talk about that for a moment though, even in terms of the word, because when we say that God is love, we need to recognize that the Bible says that straightforwardly and fleshes it out, but that's in the context of defining what love is by the character of God that's revealed and by God's acts by which he demonstrates his love. And the other thing is that if you take, for instance just the prophet Isaiah in chapter six, where given the Hebrew way of emphasis by repetition, the trisagion there, and the call of Isaiah, the holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. We are reminded that yes the Bible says categorically, unconditionally that God is love, but the Bible also says categorically, unconditionally that God is holy, and the Bible say categorically, unconditionally that God is righteous and just and gracious and merciful. Now when we teach theology we have to remind ourselves that we are not talking about a God that's divisible into a righteous part and a just part, a merciful part and a gracious part. Rather he is, to use the language that theologians have used throughout the centuries; he is infinite in all of his perfections. He is infinitely just, infinitely loving, infinitely wise, infinitely in all these things, and so isn't it true that when we say God is love that we have to make clear that God actually shows us what love is. You made that point by saying he defines God by love rather than love by God, but let's talk about how we do that. In other words, how does the Bible have us to understand that God is love? Denny?

DB: God demonstrates his own love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. I mean the chief way that God demonstrates his love for the world is through a sacrificial death, under the holy wrath of God. These things are never apart in Scripture. There's not a love coming from God that sort of sets aside his holiness, or sets aside his wrath. God's wrath is holy and infinite and it will either fall on you or fall on Jesus. And so even in the statements of Scripture that talk about his love, he's demonstrating it through a sacrifice, a sacrificial death, the very kind of death that's denied in this book. There's no such thing as a sacrificial death, that was just sort of an accommodation to ancient audiences, which Dr. Moore brought up in his commentary a day or two ago. So this is the pattern of Scripture: for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believe in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. He

gave him over to death. So the concepts of God's wrath and his love and his holiness, these are always integrated in the Scripture.

RAM: Yeah. You know the question that came to me in reading this is if God is love, and let's just admit that the great danger for us is that love becomes sentimentality, that love becomes attitudinal, and emotional, and detached from the bravery, the courage, the holiness, the righteousness that constitutes love. And so when I'm reading this I'm thinking alright then, if the Father indeed sent the Son to die for sinful humanity, by Rob Bell's measure, does the Father love the Son? In other words, if love means that everything's just okay, then I don't see how this comes anywhere close to the Gospel, in the beginning, the middle, or the end. Am I missing something? Justin?

JT: No, I think you're exactly right. We all agree that God is love, but the difference is that we feel constrained to understand God's love by the whole Biblical story line. And it seems like Rob Bell is taking a true affirmation but then constructing his own story line. We've talked a little bit about questions and a lot of times you're reading of Scripture is determined by the questions you bring to it. One of the questions you can ask yourself as you're reading the storyline of Scripture is what makes the Biblical writers sing? What makes them rejoice and when they talk about God's great love, it's always set against the backdrop of God's righteousness, God's wrath, God's holiness. And it's only then when they see themselves as utterly undeserving sinners who don't deserve any mercy, only deserve righteous judgment from God, and then they receive mercy, then they receive love, then they can sing and write and have doxologies about God's great love for us. And you know, in contemporary church history or in church history you've got John Newton, he could not have written "Amazing Grace" without recognizing that he was wretched, that he was under God's righteous condemnation. And that's one of the things I feel badly for those who read Rob Bell's book and think that this is an illuminating picture of God's love. They're missing out. The irony of the book is that Rob Bell misses the love of God and by missing it he is fundamentally unloving to his readers. They're missing out on how great grace is and what it feels like to receive underserved mercy. There is nothing like that feeling in the world, but if you start with the idea I'm already forgiven, I'm okay, you're okay, grace is no longer amazing.

RAM: Now Justin, it's so interesting, I was going to this, and we will return to it at the end I just want to assert now, one of the things that came to my mind, is that if you believe what is in this book, you can't sing many of the hymns that are most precious to us. You can't do it, you can't mean what they mean, because there's no need for the cross, there's no need for the substitution, there is no need for the mercy that is shown there and for the blood of Christ that is shed for us. Let's stay here for just a moment, the character of God, because I know we'll return to it, but from the very beginning of his book, you know Denny, it seems to me that Rob Bell suggests that if we understand God as wrathful, if you understand God as a God who would pour out his wrath upon sinners, you don't believe in a loving God, or even more than that you just don't believe

in the God of the Bible. Well, I'm confused there. I guess I'm really not. But I think a reader of his book would be because if you read the Bible, the Bible seems to have no difficulty whatsoever speaking of a God who is love and of a God who pours out his wrath upon sin. So take us, you know, what does the Bible say about God's wrath? Where does it come from?

DB: Well, I'm thinking of Romans chapter three. God set forth his Son as propitiation through faith, in his blood. And so when you think about what the innermost meaning of the cross is, it is this, you and I deserved an eternity of wrath in hell, that would be unending. Let that, wrap your mind around this for a second. It is a horror that doesn't end, and there's no anesthetic, and you never settle in, and we all deserve it. And the Bible is teaching that all the wrath that was due to us, God emptied out on his Son, at the cross. On the cross where Jesus dies the wrath was satisfied. He used up all his anger that he had towards us on Jesus. At the heart of the atonement, is this, you don't understand the cross without this, and you're talking about not understand the love of God. You don't know the love of God if you don't know the wrath of God. The precondition to understanding the love of God is that you have to see what God had to overcome to save you, and exactly what he came to do. So these things are, they may seem paradoxical but they're together everywhere in Scripture.

RAM: Russ, I think one of the problems is that when we think of wrath we think of anger. We think of a psychological state in which we've sinned. Talk about the Bible and God's wrath.

RDM: Yeah, we think about what the apostle Paul calls works of the flesh, rage and wrath. This isn't what God's wrath is. It is the settled opposition to sin. So you have a God who is not out of control, a God who is not raging, a God who is not being carried along by his passions, but a God who is settled in his opposition to sin. And I think that what Rob Bell is doing here is making the same confusion that the apostle John warns us not to make about love, which is to abstract love out from justice. He says in 1 John 3, love one another, love the brothers, and then he goes on to say, but not the way you're tempted to do it, in word and in talk. Instead love indeed in truth, and he comes along to say if your brother is in need and you say be warmed and filled, that is not love. The Bible is continually doing that and why? Because we have a tendency to think of love as simply a feeling, or to think of love as some kind of indulgence, and the Scripture has to continually come on and say, no, no, no, no, love as God loves, love as Jesus loves, and that is the love that is consistent with justice, not in opposition to it.

RAM: So God's wrath is a function of his character, of his holiness, it's the same character as his love and his mercy. And so God is perfect in displaying and pouring out his wrath where that wrath is rightly to be poured, and God is righteous when he extends his mercy where his mercy should be extended. And that takes us to Romans 3 right?

RDM: Yeah, and it's not something that's in some isolated place in the biblical text. As Justin mentioned a few minutes ago this is in the storyline everywhere, in the garden, at the flood, with the nation of Israel, in the cross, everywhere this God is a just and holy God. This is the day of salvation, judgment day is coming. That's the consistent message of every, not only of every single part of the Bible, but of every single paragraph you have this found, either in explicit teaching or in the backdrop.

RAM: Yeah, well it's in the narrative or it's in the absolutely discursive text. I mean just take Romans 3, again for example, verses 21 and following where the apostle Paul explains that God put forth Christ as a propitiation, clear substitutionary language, such that those who are in him are indeed redeemed. They become the objects of God's mercy. And then, you know, it says there that God did this in order to demonstrate himself to be both just and the justifier. And so he demands, his righteousness requires him, not because he's constrained by himself, but because he always is himself. He is the only perfect creature. He is everything that he is, perfectly, all the time for eternity and in perfect consistency with himself, he has to demand a sacrifice for sin, but in his mercy, perfectly consistent with himself, he makes provision for that sacrifice in Christ. But as the apostle Paul makes clear in that same book, faith comes by hearing. We are justified by faith alone, and that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ and to that we'll have to go as well. But I wanted us to talk about the character of God, the being of God, because if we begin, and I think this is a point that I want to make, if we begin with the fundamental assumption that to speak of the wrath of God is wrong, and that if God is loving he cannot be holy, then we're in big trouble. We probably can't do any better than Rob Bell did after that. If we start with that assumption then you're just going to have to go out there. Let's talk about the power of God for a moment because I thought the most interesting chapter in the whole book, asked the question, does God get what God wants? And kind of TNIV-ish language there but nonetheless, does God get what He wants? You know you look at that and you realize, that's a very good question. That's an inescapable biblical question and it leads us right into the heart of some of the deepest issues that the Bible directly addresses. God is sovereign, God is all powerful, God is all loving, God is merciful, holy and righteous. Does God always get what God wants? That's a fascinating question, but he seems to say, yes, emphatically. And he suggests that on the one hand if we hold to a position that suggests that not everyone is saved, that not everyone is in heaven, and that leaves anyone in hell, we are suggesting that God doesn't get what he wants when he says that it is his desire that all persons come to salvation. But then he really throws it on his head because he makes this absolutist affirmation of human autonomy. It's almost, it's almost a radian, a quintessential statement of human autonomy, that God will not violate our will, and so he has to leave it open that there are some people who are in hell because they are determined to be there, but then I want to come back and say then your answer is just a different version of no to the question does God get what God wants. Have I read that right? Is that where he leaves us?

JT: I raised that question in the initial blog post of, "Is Rob Bell a Universalist?" And there are different kinds of universalists, but the best that I can come up with, and I'm not trying to be cute or pejorative, but I think he's an incoherent universalist. On the one hand you're exactly right, he says that God's love will melt even the hardest of hearts and on the other hand he says that God will always let us do what we want. And that's a contradiction, but there's no attempt to resolve that. That's not living in a paradox, that's living in a contradiction, and so I don't understand at the end of the day, what he believes, he has said publically that this is all speculation. We don't know. Who can know? He's made a very strong argument but he's thrown in some strange things that throw us off the trail there.

RAM: Yeah. I think Denny's onto one of them though. Because, Denny, I think you're exactly right, if I were reading this book and I'm a Roman Catholic, I'm going to say to Rob Bell, thanks for swimming the Tiber. You've come a long way because you just don't know what you're talking is purgatory. Because that's exactly what Catholics hold in terms of their doctrine of purgatory, it is a place of purgation where eventually the mercy of God wins out, even over our obstinate refusal to receive grace. And I read it and I thought this is just like a purgatory that he's just putting somewhere out there between hell and heaven. Flesh that out a little bit Denny.

DB: Yeah, at the heart of this chapter is an irreconcilable contradiction. He says God *will* get what he wants, and then he says God won't get what he wants. Okay? That's just what it is. But when you look at the way this fleshes out in terms of his eschatology, he appeals to 1 Corinthians 3 in the chapter on heaven. And it's a really fascinating part of this chapter because he invokes this hypothetical scenario that there might be a racist in heaven. Okay? And this racist is going to be very uncomfortable in heaven, because 1 Corinthians 3 says that some people are going to be saved as through fire. And he says in heaven these flames are going to be licking at your heels the whole time and the worse off you are, the more you're going to have to be burned away. Your moral dross is going to have to be burned away. So you conceivably have, like I say it's kind of unclear, but it sounds like there's a racist in heaven, having his moral dross burned away. So there's not a clear separation actually, at the end. There's not a clear separation between heaven and hell in terms of a dimension. It's like we're all there together but some people are getting burned.

RAM: Yeah. Let me ask you this Russ. It seems to me that sanctification and glorification have no part at all in this book. I can't find them.

RDM: No, and I think what he's trying to do is to take C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, which of course is an allegorical telling about some truths that are very true about God's purgation of us, preparation of us for heaven, and trying to make that then into his eschatology. I think that's what's happenings there and even in the acknowledgements page it says thank you to whoever put me onto C.S. Lewis here. And then of course

Lewis would be horrified to see this being done with his work. But yeah, I mean I think what Bell is trying to do is to get away from that time of sanctification, and the time of the offer of the Gospel that the Scripture says is limited. That message of 2 Corinthians 5 and 6 doesn't make any sense with this book. Now is the day of salvation, now is the acceptable day. And why? Because there is a time of judgment coming in which all of these things, all these times for decisions are over. That language from when the prophets were in the valley of decision. None of that makes sense if this book is true. It's just you have ... enough in time for eventually everyone to change his or her mind. The problem is, if you hold to the definition of human autonomy that he seems to hold here, then I don't know you wouldn't at least have the possibility that working the other way too, which is someone in heaven deciding to drop out of heaven and to run away from God. And I'm sure Bell would say, well no one would want to do that because heaven is this perfect environment. Of course Eden was a paradise of an environment and you still had a rebellion. So it's just, it's very fuzzy, it's very inconclusive ...

RAM: I think the human autonomy is in one sense the hellishness that we see, and that was Eden all over again. And I am just stunned; this is far outside the bounds of the Calvinist-Arminian debate. This is an affirmation of personal autonomy that's beyond anything in the history of the church, but I think he honestly holds to it. He tenaciously holds to that throughout the book. I want to talk about heaven for a moment, because he actually talks about heaven before he gets to the other things and, you know, many Christians do have misperceptions about heaven. He addresses some of those, a bit snarkily, but none the less we've seen the stuff, we've seen some of the same arguments, we know the story and there is plenty of correction out there on heaven. But he makes the statement that, when I read the book the second time, and I just want to make sure, I'm reading this and he says it, where he insinuates that an eternity that is all about the glory of God is somehow boring. And you know the biblical eschatology points us to a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, to the vice-regency, the co-reigning of the saints of God, all about the glory of God. I just have to wonder what is missing there, that would make heaven better. I'm not getting it.

RDM: Well, I think that, the way I read him at least is that he is taking on something, I think he's right: that there are a lot of evangelical Christians who are actually dreading heaven, because they've heard a picture of heaven that, as he mentions here is a church service that just goes on and on and on, or a choir practice that never ends of staring into a light. And of course there are a lot of people would never put it this way, but they are really dreading that which is one of the reasons why when I go around to churches talking about new heavens and new earth, one of the questions that's going to come up immediately I know that I'm going to have, usually a widow, ask will I know my late husband in heaven. And then I'm going to have a man, typically, who's going to ask is there sex in heaven. And then I'm going to have somebody else say are we going to know each other, and behind every single one of those questions is the assumption that

they don't really want to say, am I going to have something taken away from me in heaven, is this heaven going to be less than what we have here. And so I think he's right to say, that picture of heaven is not true. Of course, that's not the picture of heaven that we see in Scripture. It's a storyline, but it's a picture that doesn't make sense in the fuzziness. I think in many ways, Bell's fuzziness here is every bit as much, and every bit as ambiguous as the picture that he's arguing against. I'm not sure whether the kind of language that he's using here, what he sees is happening at the end in the restoration of the cosmos. He uses the language of restoration, of healing, but I'm not sure exactly what that looks like for him.

RAM: Well, I can't read his mind on this, but I can read his words, and when I read that section I kind of felt like what I was hearing was N.T. Wright in the background, talking about heaven as a basically, this worldly experience and of heaven in an eschatological sense of being an extension of a this worldly experience. And if that's what heaven is, and that's all that it is, then what is the storyline. In other words, if you take the storyline and you've got creation and then you've got heaven and hell, is there a fall here? Is humanity fallen in this telling of the story? Justin?

JT: There's one paragraph in particular, where he talks and he gives one short synopsis of what he sees as the Gospel storyline of Scripture and it's a passive sort of language that we have gone off and done our whole thing, but I don't think that you can find a place in the entire book where sin is an offense against God. It's always more horizontal, it's always kind of passive, it's a kind of wandering away, but it's not an infinite offense against an infinite God, and a lot of things carry on from there.

RAM: Yeah, I want to read that passage, just so that we have it. He talks about the exuberantly liberating story and it is good news. This is on page 172 of the book. He says:

"It begins with the sure and certain truth that we are loved. That in spite of whatever has gone horribly wrong deep in our hearts and has spread to every corner of the world, in spite of our sins, failures, rebellion and hard hearts, in spite of what's been done to us or what we've done, God has made peace with us. Done. Complete. As Jesus said, 'It is finished.'"

Now it's not that I disagree with that. I just believe more than that, because when I hear the apostle present the Gospel, I never hear them talk about the Gospel as good news apart from Christ. Apart from what God did for us in Christ, and apart from the fact that if God had not done that for us in Christ, we would still be, to use the Bible's language, dead in our sins and trespasses as the Bible also says, utterly without hope in the world. I don't sense that there's the background of that kind of lostness and being without hope and sinfulness and fallenness that is absolutely indispensable and integral to the telling of the Christian story as virtually every Christian church and denomination has told it throughout church history. Is that an exaggeration?

DB: Sin is on the horizontal plane in the book. I mean when you read him and we see him in subsequent interviews, people ask him do you believe in hell? "Yeah, I believe in hell. I've seen wars, I've seen abused women, I've seen people who have been molested as children." That's all hell, and if people want to choose that on into the eschaton, they can have it. But it's not an offense against God, primarily; it's an offense against one another. And heaven is the eraser of offenses against one another. And there's no removal of the offense that there is against God, it doesn't really figure into the situation.

RAM: The cover of the book says, in terms of the subtitle, it is a book about heaven, hell, and the state of every person who ever lived. Well we talked about heaven a bit, let's talk about hell. How do we actually describe it? Before we even talk about who is there, before we talk about how it's determined whether one is in heaven or hell or if anyone ever is in hell, what is hell according to his presentation? Justin?

JT: According to his presentation it is something that we create for ourselves. I think one of the most confusing parts of the book, and maybe you have more illuminating taking it than I would, is the story of the prodigal son. That both sons are somehow together, so it's very mystifying of what he exactly means, but it almost sounds as if he thinks we will all be in heaven but some of will experience it as hell. That it's largely something of our own creation. Punishment is not something that comes from God to somebody being punished, but it's rather reaping the repercussions, the consequences of sins that we've created on this earth. So there's no sense of a fundamental separation from God, there's no sense of his righteous wrath being poured out, there's no sense of punishment, there's no sense of justice, it's a quasi-mystical perhaps in heaven, largely subjective experience that some, few people go through.

RAM: Russ, how would you summarize his presentation of hell?

RDM: I think that's, I think Justin is exactly right, that it is, he speaks of it as a continuation of an experience of being hurt, is what it sounds like to me. Either being hurt by others or being hurt by oneself and one's own choices, and he says that explicitly in several places that continues until it does that work that it's intended to do which is to ultimately drive you back to peace with God.

RAM: So, from a biblical perspective what's missing?

RDM: Well, one of the things that's missing is finality. One of the other things that's missing is judgment. It is that this is judgment is this handing over of the person to justice, that is completely missing. It's almost, this is what you're sowing you're reaping, he's using that kind of language but it's more impersonal, it's not being judged by a holy God who is then turning you over into, as Jesus would say, into outer darkness. It's more a consequence, an impersonal consequence for your choices.

RAM: Yeah, Denny, it seems to me one of the things that is most centrally missing here is that there is a judicial verdict. The Bible is very clear that God is not only just, he is judge. And then he will judge all through Christ. And by the time we get to the book of Revelation, there's a very straightforward presentation of a divine verdict, and it's a dual verdict. He says unto one, go into the lake of fire, and then that's contrast to what those whose names are in the Lamb's Book of Life. We'll talk later about how that happens but, let me be blunt. I hear some well meaning evangelicals use language that is just about as evasive as what I think Rob Bell uses here. I'll hear some well meaning evangelicals say, "I believe in hell, but I don't believe that God sends anyone there. I believe that God simply allows people who are determined to go there, to have their own way." It's kind of a softer version of the argument that he makes, but Denny, isn't there a very clear judicial verdict in the book of Revelation and in the larger biblical narrative?

DB: Absolutely, and let's just say a word to the red-letter Christians. Okay? Words of Jesus. Jesus is the one who said, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." That is not an admonition from Jesus to fear the devil. Okay? The devil's no king in hell. Hell is a place of the punitive wrath of God and Jesus is saying that God is going to destroy people there forever. And so when you see in Jesus, and especially in John's writings, both in the Gospel of John and in the Book of Revelation, you see a separation that happens at the resurrection. And there is a finality to it. And what's missing in Bell's picture is the finality is gone, but the punitive wrath of God no those who will not repent and the horror of that is completely gone. All that's there is reproofs for correction.

RAM: Yeah.

DB: And he even says it, I don't remember the page number, but he says at one point, this is not in hell the wrath of God, it's the correction of a loving father. When in the Scripture God is turning people over, and they're forever outside of his love.

RDM: Well and these are the very people that God explicitly says he is not giving correction to. He is not disciplining those who are outside of Christ, he's leaving them in their own way. He disciplines the sons whom he loves, those who are in Christ. He turns even that image around.

DB: In 1 Corinthians 5, the man who is disciplined in 1 Corinthians 5 and then also Alexander and Hymenaeus. He appeals to both of those, God reproves his children but he applies that to people who are in hell. So he makes no distinction between discipline text and texts that indicate the punitive wrath of God.

RAM: Alright, let me be explicit here and clear. We have unbiblical notions of hell that have been temptations from the very beginning. And in evangelical life, one of these

temptations has occurred, especially in English speaking evangelical theology from time to time, known as annihilationism. Justin, what is that?

JT: Annihilationism is that hell is not eternal, that at some point it may be very quickly, it may be a long period of time, but that hell will end, and that somebody may be sent to hell, they may suffer some form of punishment but then they will go out of existence. One's mortality is conditional, you only receive mortality as a gift from God and he may take that from you and then you're snuffed out like a candle.

RAM: There's a very similar argument made by some, again, liberals who deny hell from the onset don't have to find a way out of it. But those who come from an evangelical position that are working their way leftward have to find some way to describe hell in ways that does not render it eternal, conscious, judicial place of torment, etc. Annihilationism has been a way out of this. Another way out of it, more recently has been among persons who suggest that what happens is that the *imago dei* is removed from those who are in hell so that they are no longer persons. So if you ask the question, are there any persons in hell, the answer is no. There are beings who were once humans and once bearers and those who demonstrated the *imago dei* but that has been removed from them. Now Rob Bell doesn't actually into the technical arguments for either one of those but he raises both of those implicitly as possibilities. So before we leave this I feel like we have got to wrap that up. In other words, would there be a biblical basis for either one of those two variants. Russ?

RDM: Well, I mean the Scripture clearly is teaching an eternality of hell, I mean you come to the passage in Revelation chapter 20, the entire point here is that after the great white throne judgment, this day does not end. And it speaks specifically of the devil and his angels being tormented day and night forever. This is the lake of fire, Jesus says created for the devil and his angels, to which those who are outside of Christ are given over to. And so any idea that this ends has no warrant in Scripture other than taking language of death and imposing upon death and destruction a meaning of finitude that is clearly contextual and not right.

RAM: I think that's a very important point. In other words the Bible does speak of eternal death and it does speak of the destruction of the wicked. And if that was all we had, then perhaps Annihilationism would be a plausible possibility. But there are clear passages in Scripture, not just isolated passages, that describe the justice of God poured out upon sinners for eternity with their conscience knowledge of the fact that they are bearing the wrath of God. You know, I can understand that there are those who would look at the doctrine of hell and say, that's really tough, but I would simply say it's no tougher than the doctrine of human sinfulness, or of death as the verdict upon human sinfulness or anything else, but we have to know that it's good news that we know that the same way the apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 7, we should be thankful for the law because the law showed us our need for Christ. These things show us how sweet

the Gospel is and how precious and powerful is the work of Christ that anyone is able to avoid that.

RDM: You see, I think that's what I think he misses. He gets something of the horror of hell and I think he recoils in a way that we ought to recoil. God says I do not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. Those who are excited that there is a hell are not reflecting the mind of God. So he's right to get a sense of the horror there. What he doesn't get is the horror of the human insurrection against God. So let's say for instance you have decisions that are being made in a finite period of time that then are punished forever without seeing the magnitude of what it means to sin against God and also without seeing that in hell people do not suddenly start loving the Lord their God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strengths. They instead are given over apart from any restraining common grace to who they are, that downward spiral which means that you have sin upon sin, even compounded there. And so he doesn't get the horror of that side of it and it's therefore imbalanced.

RAM: Now before leaving hell, you know we just have to ask again how it is that anyone would be there, and how is it then that the Bible says that anyone ends up in hell? How does that happen? Because I think he asked the question in the middle rather than in the beginning. In other words, to be clear, he doesn't assume that hell is default position toward which humanity, after the fall, is rightly sentenced. He seems to think that hell is kind of out there as a possibility in case something worse happened that has already happened.

JT: It seems like he starts with heaven, peace, forgiveness, as the default, and people might wander away from that, where the Biblical picture is that as a result of the fall we all fall in Adam, and so therefore condemnation, fallenness, rebellion, is our default. And that again is what makes grace and mercy so sweet, that we are hell-bound sinners who have been rescued by our righteous Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And if you miss that, your answer is determined by where you start the story and he starts it on exactly the wrong page.

RAM: You know, Russ, you mentioned the influence of C.S. Lewis here and albeit a rather sideways influence. I thought of C.S. Lewis at another point in this book, and that is that Lewis made very clear in a sense of almost a pre-biblical understanding. He seems to say I understood this even before I understood the Gospel. That if there is a God, if he is good, he must punish sin.

RDM: Yes. And not only C.S. Lewis said that, he's picking up something that the apostle Paul is saying in Romans chapter two when he says there is a conscience imbedded in every single human being that is pointing toward judgment day. So the problem, and this is what I think breaks my heart the most about this book, is the people that Rob Bell thinks he's going to reach with his redefined Christianity, are not people who don't believe in

hell and who are therefore offended by Christianity that is preaching and speaking of a hell they don't believe in. There is no one like that. Instead Hebrews chapter 2 says that apart from Christ we are all held in captivity to lifelong slavery to the one who has the power of death, the accuser. Everyone who is human has a conscience that is pointed toward hell that is then being silenced. But there is a sense of justice and a sense of, as the Book of Hebrews says, a certain fiery expectation of judgment. What he is doing is simply not answering what is already imbedded in the human heart, both in terms of a longing for justice, when something is done to me there's a longing for that to be made right, and also a sense of accusation and a sense of fear. He can't answer Satan's accusations against the lost people that he's talking to because he's not willing to do it with the only means that the Gospel gives us which is to say Satan is right. But, in Christ there is therefore now no condemnation. So all this is doing is furthering condemnation and not answering those questions that are there. Again I think Lewis is right, before anyone ever even hears the name of Jesus Christ or a word from the Bible.

RAM: Yeah. Even to imagine when he talks about to dwell, even to imagine that there would be a gracious God, he's going to have to be ungracious towards evil, otherwise he's not really gracious. And you know the Bible makes clear that God's justice is our only hope. We long for shalom and Rob Bell talks about that longing for shalom. That longing for shalom is all predicated on a God who's magnificent, perfect justice makes all things right. And only then are the eyes dry and the tears wiped away.

RDM: Which is why for the New Testament, the scandal is not are there some people in hell. The thing that is the hardest thing to imagine in Romans chapter 3, after Paul has gone through and said look at the horror of the gentiles in sin, look at the horror of the Jewish people in sin, look at the horror of the whole of humanity in sin, how is it that God can be just? And anyone can then be forgiven of that. How is God not then violating what the Proverbs says in what we all know to be true, that a judge who justifies the wicked is an unjust judge. And how is it that God who justifies the wicked is not thereby unjust? And that's what the argument is then answering in those Pauline texts. It doesn't make sense that this is the picture.

RAM: So let's deal with the last part of the subtitle of the book. That is the fate of every single person who ever lived. Justin, you used the word universalism. In different engagements Rob Bell has had about the book, the word inclusivism has come up. I think we really need to talk about some terms before we even talk about the book so let's define universalism. Define that Denny. Put it in a context, biblical, historical, when we talk about universalism, what are we talking about?

DB: We're talking about the idea, there's a lot of different kinds of universalists but we're talking basically about the idea that everyone ends up in a state of blessedness. You can have a pluralistic kind of a universalists that all religions are basically going to the same place, you can have a Christian kind of universalist that everybody's going to be saved by

Christ. But at the ultimate end of it, everyone's going to end up in a state of blessedness. Rob Bell is a little bit unclear on what kind he is. At one point he talks about different religions and whether or not they get there and then in even some of the subsequent interviews, he sort of backs away and questions about other religions and whether they take you there and I thought it was interesting in the interview with Lisa Miller. Even though he said I'm not a universalist, she said you're teaching universalism and she recoiled from the notion that her Jewish...

RAM: Yeah, hold that for a minute. What we're talking about universalism, is the idea which is not new and when Rob Bell says these aren't new ideas, he's absolutely right on this one. Universalism is the idea that in the end there is no one who is outside the redemptive power and purpose of God. And that's just straightforward. You could talk about *apokatastasis*, the idea of Origen and what the earliest proponents of this. You can talk about Barth, in terms of what Berkouwer called the triumph of grace in his theology, when grace eventually has to triumph over all things and if grace is grace and God is God then eventually love wins, kind of the same thing. But universalism suggests that it doesn't matter how you get there and universalism seen most clearly in the fact that in the United States the Unitarians and the Universalists have generally come together, is that universalism requires no Christology whatsoever. In universalism the work of Christ becomes merely, if it's referenced at all, Christ is merely a teacher who is a martyr who shows us the love of God, but there's no sense that everyone has to have any reference to Christ at all in order to be saved. It's simply that God's redemptive purpose includes all. But then there's another word, and this word has basically emerged in the twentieth century because there are persons who wished to have a universalistic end with a Christological means, and that's where the word inclusivism comes up. So Russ, explain inclusivism.

RDM: Well inclusivism says that you are saved only through Jesus Christ so that Jesus is the only way to the Father. But one does not have to have knowledge that it is Jesus in whom he is believing. So you can follow whatever path it is that you are following and believe that you are worshipping Allah or believe that you are worshipping a monotheistic being, or whatever it is. And then you find out that you really were trusting in Jesus at the eschaton. The one you knew as Allah or as Krishna or as whoever it is turns out to have been Jesus so that that person is saved because of the death of Jesus and because of the grace of God. So it's still Christ's saving everyone but there is no need for conscious faith in Christ to get there.

RAM: And that inclusivism was well, for instance very creatively expressed by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner when he spoke about anonymous Christians. There are people out there who don't know they're Christians, they've never heard of Christ, they've responded to the grace and revelation of God or whatever form they have found it that they may be adherent of other world religions or of no religion, but they somehow have responded to the grace of God and they are drawn and eventually they will be drawn

into Christ's redemptive work and so they're not saved apart from Christ. But they are saved without conscious knowledge of him.

RDM: Well, it seems to be what he's saying about Gandhi when he begins with this anecdote about someone writing under Gandhi's picture, "Reality check, he's in hell," which no doubt that guy's a jerk, whoever did that. That's not anything that's commendably Christian, to respond that way.

RAM: We don't do theology by graffiti anyway.

RDM: Right, that's right. And he comes back to say how can you say that Gandhi is in hell. Now obviously he knows that Gandhi did not convert to Christianity, so somehow Gandhi has to be saved by Christ without ever knowing that he's believing in Christ.

RAM: You know, here's my argument I think that when Rob Bell addresses these issues in his book, he's an inclusivist when he talks about the means and universalist when he talks about the end. I think he doesn't perhaps even realize, maybe he's not self-consciously juggling it that way but when he talks, when he answers the question such as in the Lisa Miller interview, etc., he talks like an inclusivist. But in the book he makes affirmations that are Universalist. Now I want to tee up here Denny for what you were itching to say before because it's a very important point. Lisa Miller was not impressed with the inclusivism.

DB: Oh no. She smelled out that even the people who don't have conscious faith in Jesus still have to be saved by Jesus. So I would say that Bell really retreated from the offense of the cross, but he was still too close for her, because she said what about my relatives who died apart from Christ and all of this, tragically. And she just couldn't hold to that that they had to be saved through Christ. But that's, I think that's where he is.

RAM: Alright, Justin, here's where, I think one of the most crucial issues we need to discuss comes. I think on the one hand this book was written as a form of apologetics, as a way of explaining the faith as he understands it, to a lost world. But I don't think, in fact I have a pretty good hunch that that's not where the book's going to be read and where it's going to have its primary influence, and quite frankly is one of the reasons we are having this conversation. It's because, I think, the real function of this book is going to be to give some fuel to those who are trying to move out of a traditional Christian understanding into a revisionist understanding. They're going to move out of a belief in hell into something else. This gives him the way to do it, because raising the very point that we just talked about here with Denny, I don't think lost people are going to feel any better to be told that they're really just Christians who don't yet know it, than to be told that they are going to be facing the justice of God unless they come to faith in Christ. In other words, I think that moment in the interview with Lisa Miller was a phenomenally important revelation of the fact that this is not an argument that impresses unbelievers.

JT: Yeah, atheists are not going to be impressed by this book. Skeptics are not going to be impressed by this book. People who are going to be impressed by this book are disaffected evangelicals who have their own questions about divine justice, about hell, and they want somebody to come along who is phenomenally creative, a good writer, winsome, hip, charismatic, to tell them that what you intuitively feel that this God is demeaning and toxic, and what you've grown up with is untrue. He's coming along and saying, as you said earlier, it's okay. You're right, it's all going to work out in the end. And so evangelicals, disaffected evangelicals who are drifting are the prime audience for this book and I think they're the ones that we need to be concerned about. We're not on this stage merely because we want to give a refutation of an argument. We care about people and people who have grown up in the church, who have sung these same songs, who are being won over by somebody who has produced great videos and is a good communicator, but is ultimately teaching a false Gospel.

RAM: Yeah, I want to make clear that we're not having this conversation, just as you said, just because we found a right target for a juicy conversation. We wouldn't be having this panel discussion if John Shelby Spong wrote another book. He's denied just about every doctrine but he's identified so far out there on the left, I'm not worried about evangelicals all of a sudden carrying John Shelby Spong books. Rob Bell is a different story. He has a tremendous influence, especially with younger evangelicals, and I think that's why we have to talk about this because we're very concerned about the loss of the Gospel. Not just getting a doctrine wrong, but the loss of the Gospel in this. In my major article that I published just a couple days ago on this, I titled my article "We've Seen This All Before." And it's because we have. There isn't a new argument. He begins in his book by saying this is not a new argument. These arguments have been made before. They have! They've been made before, we talked about universalism and origin and all the rest. But it's very interesting to note and as scholars of historical theology have noted that the doctrine of hell has often been that most odious, difficult doctrine that is combined with the wrath of God and the justice of God that becomes kind of the catalyst for theological liberalism. Now we can use the word liberal as a code word. We can throw it as an epithet. That's not what we're doing here. We're talking technically about a theological movement that's well defined and well understood that has to do with the fact that on the other side of the Enlightenment, on the other side of skepticism, on the other side of rationalism, on the other side of Darwinism, Marxism, and everything else there was a theological movement that certainly became very formalized, first in Germany in the late nineteenth century and then in the English speaking world as well, that said in order to save Christianity, we're going to have to get rid of those doctrines that are just no longer credible and beyond that are even odious and are considered horrifying by the secular world. I mentioned in my article Schleiermacher, who wrote these speeches to the cultured despisers of religion in order to say I know you can't believe in the Trinity, I know you don't believe in divine justice, you don't believe in hell, but there's still spiritual value to be retained here. You know,

when I read this book I just kept seeing on one page I would see Bultmann, in fact he doesn't cite Bultmann but he almost quotes him where he talks about people who live in the modern age and use electricity and things like that, who don't believe in heaven and hell. The premise of theological liberalism, Russ, is that we are going to have to change the faith if it's going to be credible, right?

RDM: And it never works. You just never have a Universalist Great Awakening in history. So when Rob Bell says this is not new historically, that's true, and the very thing he's attempting to do it never succeeds. You always wind up losing the church and unable to reach the people outside the church. I thought about it as I was reading this book, the NPR program, This American Life, did a broadcast one time about Carlton Pearson, the Pentecostal preacher, protégé of Oral Roberts, who became a universalist. He had a mega-church in Oklahoma and believed that how much more will the church grow once he gets rid of the scandal of people going to hell. And they interviewed the youth minister, the NPR program did at that church and the guy said, you know after we stopped preaching hell, we found out people don't come to church anymore. They don't tithe anymore, they're gone, and now the church is shutting down. Why is that? Well, once you remove any concept of justice, any concept of cause and effect, once you live in a universe that is just all fated to be all right in the end, there's nothing distinctively Christian left anymore.

RAM: Right.

RDM: My sheep hear my voice, Jesus says, and what they hear is the message of the cross and the resurrection. Once that's muted, and you can't have the cross and the resurrection in the way it's presented in the Scripture without hell, you wind up losing it. Every single time ...

RAM: The cultured despisers of religion are never won over by an argument from liberal theology because they don't need it. You know, just saying, we can add some spirituality to your life, and you know fundamentally here's the other thing, if I'm a secular skeptic, and I'm offended by the idea of hell, if someone comes along to me and says, "it's okay," I already think it's okay! If I didn't think it was okay, I'd be trying to figure out how to make it okay.

RDM: And if I want spirituality I'll just do yoga.

RAM: Yeah. In other words, let's say that there is that secular skeptic out there who's worried maybe it's not okay. Maybe I'm not okay, you're not okay, maybe there's a problem. I read this book, I'm not sure that someone who doesn't think it's okay is going to think it's okay.

RDM: No, there's not message of hope here. That's the problem. That's what breaks my heart about this book is that you have people who have consciences that are plagued and

they do not have the message of the blood of Christ that John says cleanses us from all unrighteousness. It's just not there, and so they're not hearing in what he is saying, even what it is that they know to be true. What we all knew to be true when we're under conviction of sin, and it just doesn't resonate with the human heart at all.

RAM: You know, Justin, I think one of the things we want to say is that we do not want to read Rob Bell's book and say no it's not this good. The good news that's in the Gospel is not quite so good as this. What we want to say is that the good news is infinitely better than this.

JT: The bad news is really, really bad, and because we know how terrible it is and we know how terrible the consequences are, we have seen in the pages of Scripture the beauty and the hope of the alternative and Rob Bell talks about picking stories, one story that's better than another. We don't get to pick the story, the story has been given to us from God and it is the greatest news in the world. Somebody did a blog post the other day saying, you know, I think universalism is a heresy, but I have to look at my own life and wonder am I a functional universalist, the way I'm living and we have a great story to tell and so I hope one of the effects of this book is that it will make us understand the horror of hell in a deeper way and the beauty and the holiness of God in a more profound way, and motivate us to tell the Gospel story to our neighbors who are lost and need the greatest news in the world, that salvation is available through Jesus Christ.

RAM: Denny, you have written on this and entered into the public conversation. What do you say to someone who says, well you have basically helped to give this book publicity, you know, maybe no one would notice if you hadn't done this. How do you respond to that?

DB: I respond to it the same way you did before we came in here. Athanasius gave Arius publicity, but you have to be able to refute error. The Bible says that, our concern here is not just merely academic, it's pastoral. In Titus chapter 1, Paul said to Titus that elders, pastors have to be able to exhort in sound doctrine and they have to be able to refute those who contradict, because we see something poisonous here. At the end of the day we see something very, very poisonous here. And if you believe this, if you believe what's presented in this book, you're going to be blinded from what God wants you to see about him. Hell, the doctrine of hell is given to us as an inducement to see the greatness of God and our need for a Savior, and you just can't see that in this kind of a book.

RAM: I think it's really important that those of us who believe that salvation is by grace alone, know that we are not having this conversation because we are smarter than Rob Bell. It is because by the grace and mercy of God, we are constrained by truth and we are a part of a community of confessing believers who will by the grace and mercy of God, by the command of Christ hold each other to the Gospel. And so I just want to make very clear that we are not having this conversation just because we think we've got a better

understanding than Rob Bell. We do believe that in this case, not because we are any smarter, but because we think that as you follow through and you see the faith once for all delivered to the saints, we want to be as absolutely sure as possible that we're preaching the Gospel the way Christ and the apostles preached it. And thus when we have a conversation like this, we're really saying to the world, we're really saying to the larger community of Christians, if anything we have said in the course of this conversation is in any way, sub-biblical or aberrant, or can in any way be improved over how we are saying it, we hope folks will love us enough to tell us. And I want to love Rob Bell in the right sense today by coming to a conclusion and praying for him and for those who will read his book. Let's pray:

Our Father, we thank you for giving us such a Gospel, for loving us so lavishly in Christ. Father, we thank you for not merely giving us a book of questions, but your written revelation of emphatic teaching, content, answers. Father, we are here because we believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ. And we are here because we believe that the Bible is your inerrant and infallible Word. Father, we pray to be constrained by our love of Christ and by our commitment to your Word to believe and to teach those things that are true. Father, we pray today for Rob Bell, how you have gifted him, what an incredible communicator he is, what incredible artistic gifts you have invested in him. Father, I pray, as I believe a Christian brother should pray for another, that he would be also constrained by love of Christ and love of his Gospel, and love for and obedience to your Word to a much clearer and more accurate presentation of these things, and most crucially of the Gospel. And I pray that for myself that I will be freed from error and protected and preserved from false teaching but we do pray urgently. We can see how you would mightily use this man in order to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and I pray that his obvious love for people would be translated to a love for them in the Gospel in such a clear and unadulterated way. Father, I pray for those who will read this book. I pray that they will be given, if they are believers, eyes of discernment, and Father, if they are unbelievers I pray that they will read this and want to know more and I pray that there will be someone to take the Gospel to them, because as we are here we believe with all of our hearts that if they do not hear, they will not believe. And if they do not believe, they are not saved. We wholeheartedly believe that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved, even as we base that confidence on the fact that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. Father, may this book compel believers to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth and to share the Gospel with the person in the next seat. Father, we pray all these things, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Thank you for coming. Please express appreciation to those who joined me here.