

JRP's FAQ on Rob Bell's Love Wins

Part 1: Goofy Introductory Comments Now

JEEZ! YOU'RE ONE OF THE FORUM'S MAIN AUTHORS AND YOU'RE JUST NOW GETTING AROUND TO THIS?!?

Yes. I have a list of reasons here if you'd like to--

WAIT, WHAT IS THIS? WHY ARE WE ASKING QUESTIONS IN ALL-CAPS?!

This is a FAQ. It's a style pretty common on the internet, especially when authors want to have a little fun doing a review and/or commentary on something.

WHAT DOES FAQ MEAN?!

It's an abbreviation. Usually it stands for Frequently Asked Questions--

BUT WE'VE READ QUICKLY DOWN THROUGH THE LIST AND WE CAN'T IMAGINE MOST OF THESE QUESTIONS BEING ASKED BY ANYONE, MUCH LESS FREQUENTLY SO!

--which, as I was about to say, is why this technically isn't a frequently asked question list. It's a fraternally anticipated question list. Same acronym. {smile}

FINE, WHATEVER. ARE WE GOING TO BE COMMENTING AND ASKING ANTICIPATED QUESTIONS IN THIS SNARKY AND RATHER HOSTILE STYLE (AND AS IF "WE" ARE MULTIPLE PEOPLE) ALL THE WAY THROUGH?

Yeah, that's part of the overall style when an internet author wants to borrow the general FAQ format for more informal and entertaining purposes.

BAH, WHY BOTHER TRYING TO BE INFORMAL AND ENTERTAINING?! ARE YOU INCOMPETENT AT THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS AND TRYING TO COVER UP FOR THAT!?

Actually I'm the kind of person who writes eye-glazingly lengthy technical analyses on theology and exegetics. But Rob's book is not a technical analysis by any stretch of the imagination. So if I wrote a technical paper in favor of his positions (more or less) I would only be giving my own arguments, not reporting on his (such as they are). Or alternately I'd be spearing him on technical grounds. Also, I don't recall having seen anyone else report on his book this way yet, so...

SO DOES BELL WRITE HIS BOOK IN THIS SILLY FAQ STYLE?

No no no! But he does write in an extremely informal style, pretty similar (as it happens) to how I wrote *Cry of Justice*, or to how I wrote the fifth Section of *Sword to the Heart*: he uses

short paragraphs and sentence fragments and what I call meta-paragraphs (where an extra blank line is inserted between paragraphs or around a short paragraph in order to give a bit longer pause or to emphasize what's being said in the short paragraph); and even intentionally decaps the start of some sentences (or sentence fragments) or leaves off punctuation at the end of a line, in order to try to represent how someone might be speaking.

I mention this, not only to shamelessly plug my own work (although that, too... plug... plug...), and not only to defend him against spurious complaints about his formatting, but also for a self-critical purpose: I have to testify that I am somewhat emotionally jealous and resentful that he's scoring huge attention with this popular work when (1) I do the same thing dangit but I don't get to have even distantly the same attention!--and (2) I do the same thing dangit but I bother to do the logical math first!

That fifth and final Section of chapters in SttH follows four whole Sections of chapters (more than *600 pages worth!*) where (despite a few informalities along the way) I'm chewing constantly and progressively through a vastly huge number of topics on metaphysics and philosophy, many of which are quite difficult. I did my pushups, so I have leeway to play around in the final 80ish pages; and more importantly if someone critiques me on a position, I can point back to where I did the work and we can discuss the technical details pro and con. Even in the novel (and its sequels), while things are far from clear, that's only because I'm keeping my plot cards close to my vest for entertainment purposes. I am not trying to be obscure in my non-fiction and especially not in my theology!--even though sometimes I may be talking densely.

But I get the impression sometimes that Rob hasn't really thought all this through, and may not even be interested in thinking it through, which naturally leaves him unable to defend himself adequately on technical grounds against challenges--yet he also wants to definitely say that those people over there are doing something terribly, horribly wrong!

This annoys the urbanity out of me, at several levels, both personal and professional. But that annoyance could lead me to over-critique him, too, or to overlook things he may be doing correctly. Anyway I will be trying to compensate in his favor.

SO IS BELL BEING INFORMAL AND ENTERTAINING BECAUSE HE'S INCOMPETENT AT THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS AND TRYING TO COVER UP FOR THAT!?

This was my suspicion going into the book, based on how he often evaded giving technical answers to technical challenges in preliminary interviews. I should add however that ever since I picked up a stomach virus a few weeks ago (see the interrupted

answer to the first question above {wry grin}), I've had a personal moratorium on his later interviews (and on articles sniping against him) until I could catch up with reading the book and writing this FAQ.

So he might be doing better now than he was before. It isn't impossible. I guess.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE YOU AREN'T SURE HE MIGHT BE DOING BETTER IN THE BOOK, EVEN AFTER READING HIS BOOK.

Eh, no. But I can honestly say I do think more highly of the book than I was expecting. He does go into more biblical detail than one might suppose from his early interviews, for example, and I was especially pleased to see a plethora of Old Testament references.

YOUR ATTEMPT AT DISTRACTING US FROM THE "EH, NO" AT THE BEGINNING OF THAT PARAGRAPH FARES POORLY.

That's because I'm more than a little iffy about the contexts of all those references panning out as well as he presents them for. (...I'm almost certain the grammar of that sentence added up.) I know some of them certainly do because I'm familiar with the references myself in my own apologetic work. But I haven't looked up all of them (yet). And he doesn't always present his refs with contextual discussion. From long experience debating theology exegetically, I can't help but be suspicious about that.

SO WHY NOT LOOK ALL OF THEM UP BEFORE WRITING THIS FAQ?

Partly because I'm already running waaaaay behind in getting this thing out (which I feel bad about, considering I'm one of the guest authors and admins for the forum); and partly because I feel like I ought to review the book on its own merits as presented. People expecting contextual discussion and that sort of thing in his book will sometimes be disappointed.

SOMETIMES?

Not all the time. I'll provide examples later.

SO ARE WE DONE WITH YOUR GOOFY INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS NOW?

Yep!

ONWARD THEN!

Part 2: Duck Season

LOOK, WE JUST WANT TO KNOW IF ROB BELL IS A HERETIC. THAT'S ALL WE WANT TO KNOW.

Of course he is! Duh.

...WAIT, WHAT?

That's because he's trying not to be a universalist. But actually he is one. Since I myself am a universalist, naturally I'm going to think that his insistence on being non-universalistic is heretical. Fortunately he's less heretical than he thinks he is. Although, he isn't trying to be heretical, he's trying to be orthodox, and doubtless believes he's orthodox, just like I believe I'm orthodox, and Olsen believes he himself is orthodox (but Calvinists like Piper and we universalists are heretics), and Piper believes he himself is orthodox (but Arminians like Olsen and universalists like myself are heretics).

So it's complicated.

NEVER MIND. WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO ASK YOU IF A UNIVERSALIST IS A HERETIC ANYWAY.

Especially since I'm going to be picky and nuanced and detailed and charitable to my opponents in their favor (adding more picky nuanced details thereby)...

SO IS BELL CHARITABLE TO HIS OPPONENTS?!

Um... no? I think the answer is no.

YOU AREN'T SURE?

From his attitude in other regards, one might have expected him to go out of his way to talk about how Calvs and Arms are both getting some important things right (especially since he works hard to explicitly affirm some things important to both Calvs and Arms, including against each other). But I don't recall this ever happening in the book (or in the few interviews I heard from him before reading the book).

I might be mis-remembering about that. I might just not recall it. I do however recall him strongly dissing non-universalists of various stripes. Without mentioning, when he does so, that they're also getting a lot of things right.

YET FROM WHAT YOU SAID HE'S A NON-UNIVERSALIST HIMSELF!

Well, non-universalists do have a tendency to diss each other for not being the right kind of non-universalist, you know. {wry

grin} And what I said was that he actually is a universalist. He's just trying not to be.

YEAH, ABOUT THAT...?!

Categorically he's a universalist the same way Roman Catholic systematic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar is a universalist yet not. And the same way Protestant systematic theologian Karl Barth is a universalist yet not. And the same way Eastern Orthodox systematic theologian Sergius Bulgakov is a universalist yet not.

All three of those other (far more technically oriented and detailed) theologians, who are hugely famous and well-respected among scholars of their respective branches of Nicene-Chalcedonian 'catholic' Christianity, go very far out of their way to strongly stress the scope and the persistence of God's salvation of sinners from sin. And all three are aware (to at least some extent) of apparent revelation from God in the scriptures that He will someday eventually succeed in saving all sinners from sin. But none of them consider themselves to be universalists, because none of them affirm that God will certainly save all sinners from sin (despite apparent revelation indicating so). In fact all three go out of their way to deny that they are universalists, pretty much on that ground.

Rob Bell, despite being much more loosey-goosey with his theological presentation than those giants (at least in *Love Wins*), fits that paradigm precisely. He goes out of his way to strongly affirm both the scope and the persistence; he goes out of his way to mention various scriptures seeming to reveal that God will surely someday succeed in that scope and persistence of salvation; and he goes out of his way to deny that he believes this will certainly happen. He never uses the term 'universalist' or 'universal salvation' or anything of similar meaning like that. (No form of the word 'universal' shows up in his book at all, incidentally.) But he still, in effect, denies being one in his book; and when people have charged him with it (in the few early interviews I've seen) he still denies it. (Or evades the question.)

On the other hand, just like those three systematic giants, Rob also refuses to state for sure that at least some people will not be saved from sin. In this he (and those other gentlemen) could be considered half-a-step farther toward universalism than C. S. Lewis, whom Rob has some familiarity with (and admiration for): Lewis strongly affirmed the scope and even on occasion strongly affirmed the persistence, which is why he could pretty directly affirm an expectation (if not straight out teach a belief) that Christ can and will save at least some souls post-mortem, even out from hell. But Lewis on other occasions also strongly affirmed that we had to accept that at least some sinners would not be saved from sin by Christ; and, not incidentally, to explain this Lewis turned around and denied the

persistence of Christ in saving from sin. (Not that he believed Christ would willingly give up persisting in salvation, but that the sinners would make Christ do so by damning themselves beyond Christ's power to save.)

SO... WAIT, WE'RE CONFUSED AGAIN. WHY IS BELL A UNIVERSALIST WHEN HE DENIES ALL PEOPLE WILL CERTAINLY BE SAVED?

As I just mentioned, there is a subtle but strong distinction between Rob and Lewis on this. Lewis outright denied universal salvation, even though he affirmed post-mortem salvation. Rob refuses to deny universal salvation.

BUT HE REFUSES TO AFFIRM IT, TOO!

True.

SO WHY ARE HIS NON-UNIVERSALIST OPPONENTS JUMPING UP AND DOWN ON HIM FOR BEING A UNIVERSALIST?!

Because he is. He isn't the kind of universalist who affirms universal salvation will certainly happen! He rather confusedly thinks this means he isn't a universalist. But he is.

WELL WE'RE CONFUSED, TOO! WHY WOULDN'T THAT MEAN HE ISN'T A UNIVERSALIST!?

While I'm very sympathetic to the notion that people should be taken seriously when they claim to be or not to be something, there are also logical limits to how far that freedom extends. The limit here is a subtle one, and I think it's very forgivable and understandable that Rob considers himself to not be a universalist, especially since the vague popular notion of universalism is that everyone just goes to heaven regardless of any consideration. It's this notion of universalism (which certainly is a type of universalism) that most people currently bother believing or opposing. Rob is very definitely not that kind of universalist, and many of his opponents are being extremely unfair to him (as well as being grossly inept at evaluating claims, including his) by trying to paint him that way.

Rob doesn't help matters here because he himself tends to promote (in a sloppy ill-defined sort of way) the notion that the only real universalism is that popularistic automatic free passcard universalism; consequently that by refusing to affirm God will certainly succeed in persistently saving all sinners from sin, he is only (and rightly) denying the vague non-Christian popularistic notion. As if God being successful in leading all sinners to repent of their sins and reconciling them personally with the people (God and man both) whom the sinners have sinned against, would somehow be tantamount to the "whee everyone goes to heaven regardless of anything let's party" party.

UH... YEAH WHATEVER, BUT NONE OF THAT EXPLAINS WHY YOU KEEP SAYING HE'S A UNIVERSALIST ANYWAY DESPITE HIS OWN DENIALS OF BEING ONE...

I know, I'm getting there. In my roundabout way I'm also trying to lead up to explaining why his opponents aren't only being massively ignorant gnat-wits in trying to insist that Rob is being "heretical" about something, namely about being a universalist.

See, they're picking up on something, too: that subtle but crucial technical distinction between what Rob is claiming (and not claiming) and what Lewis was claiming. Lewis would sometimes strongly affirm the persistence of God in saving sinners from sin, but he would turn around later (sometimes in the same book!) and strongly disaffirm it, too. This is why Lewis was Arminianistic and not Calvinistic, categorically--as even Calv admirers of Lewis agree--and also why Lewis was definitely Arm instead of Kath (Katholic, Christian Universalistic). It wasn't only that Lewis explicitly affirmed hopeless damnation (whether annihilationism or eternal conscious torment, though more toward the former than the latter). It was because Lewis explicitly denied the persistence of God's salvation (despite affirming it elsewhere.)

Rob only affirms the scope and the persistence. He's consistent about this. He doesn't turn around and deny one or the other later, even when trying to explain how in fact some people might continue being punished by God as impenitent sinners and maybe even punished forever! This is also the big distinction between the Big Three Bs of 20th century 'catholic' systematic theology (Balthasar, Barth and Bulgakov) versus Lewis on soteriology: they also all refused to turn around and definitely deny the persistence or scope of God's salvation. (I'm admittedly a bit fuzzier about Barth on this, but I think I'm right. I'll certainly welcome correction!)

AND WHY DOES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE? OTHER THAN BEING AT LEAST ADMIRABLY CONSISTENT (UNLIKE LEWIS OF ALL PEOPLE!) ON THIS TOPIC?

Keep in mind, most Calv and Arm theologians are just as admirably consistent on this topic, too. Lewis had to be inconsistent because (in my estimation) he was so awesomely competent that he came to see how both sides were correct in important ways (even though against each other)--but couldn't quite figure out how to make this jive with what he thought was hard-core evidence against universalism being true. So (logically, in its own way) he had to flatly contradict himself on a point; and being a huge proponent of rational action and real (though derivative) free will, he turned around in a way that protected free will at the expense of protecting sinners from being successfully saved by God! As a Calv might

disapprovingly (and in a way quite correctly) put it, Lewis sacrificed the omniscient Lordship of God to the lordship of Man.

Rob refuses to do that; which is ironic since his Calv opponents (and even some Arm opponents) paint him as sacrificing God's Lordship for Man's, too. But because Rob refuses to sacrifice God's Lordship to the free will of Man, Rob also refuses the softer Arminian route taken by Lewis: sinners don't get to finally defeat God (by God's permission or otherwise).

But also because Rob refuses to sacrifice the loving Lordship of God, affirming this Lordship instead (if on rather vague grounds, which his opponents see plenty of avenue for attacking, and rightly so in a way), Rob refuses the harder Arminian route taken by hardcore Arms: God eventually loses patience and just gives up trying. Or even stops trying for anyone after Christ (analogically speaking) opens the door of the fold, leaving it entirely up to the sheep to wander in if we care to and not if not (even if we're out stuck on the hillside and simply have no opportunity to get to the fold of the door!)

On the other hand, and in much the same way, because Rob refuses to sacrifice the loving Lordship of God, affirming it instead, Rob refuses the Calvinistic route of claiming God acts to save some sinners but not to save all of them.

And that's the nub of the matter. Rob claims that God acts with ultimate broadness of scope to save sinners, and Rob also claims God acts with ultimate deepness of persistence to save sinners. He doesn't put the matter in quite that fashion, but that's what it adds up to. And he doesn't turn around later and deny one of those positions.

Calvs think Arms are in doctrinal error (which is technical heresy even if not the sin of heresy) for insisting on the scope of God's salvation. So logically they're going to think Rob is heretical too for exactly the same reason. Depending on how charitable they are, Calvs might bother to mention that Rob is entirely correct about God's persistence in salvation, but they have to call a spade a spade and coup him for heresy on the scope.

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Moreover, a lot of people (even trained professionals) are unable to see any difference between a technical error and the ethical sin of heresy. So that adds a lot of nitro to the fire.

More moreover, a lot of people (even trained professionals) believe in salvation by correct doctrinal assent (even though ironically this is the heresy of gnosticism!) So even if they might allow that Rob isn't sinning, he's still (if they're right) leading people into hopeless damnation by teaching them not to believe the right doctrinal passcards to get into heaven. No one is tolerant of ebola; nor should they be!

To give another relevant example: I strongly affirm and refuse to deny the scope and the persistence of God's salvation of sinners from sin. I do so for picky technical reasons involving my assent of orthodox trinitarian theism being true, rather than for vague emotional reasons of the sort Rob talks about in his book; but we're still at the same subsequent doctrinal result.

Now I can believe this and still believe (and even insist) that, out of love for the sinner, God will not simply treat the sinner as a puppet or brainwash the sinner into doing right with an omnipotent poof of power. Rob is exactly on board with that, too. Consequently, I could believe that some sinners might choose to keep on rebelling forever; or they might not, who knows? Once again, this is exactly where Rob ends up in the book. If God saves them, love wins. If God keeps them in existence and able to rebel but also able to repent someday (even if they themselves never choose to do so) and keeps leading them to repent forever (even if they never do), then love at least still hasn't lost!--and love is still loving those sinners with an actively saving love.

But I would be a universalist, even if I believed that and no further. I know because that was in fact how I first came to be a universalist: I came to realize God's salvation was both universal in scope and universal in persistence. That's neither Calvinistic theology nor Arminianistic theology.

That's universalism.

And that's why Rob is also a universalist.

As it happens, I also affirm in favor of the scriptures that seem to indicate God will eventually succeed in saving everyone. Rob knows and talks about at least some of those same scriptures, and he shows that he knows perfectly well what they add up to. Unlike me, Rob doesn't interpret those over against other scriptures appearing to talk about hopeless damnation. Based on things he writes in the book, I expect this is because he thinks he is somehow preserving human free will. And he may just not see any principle clearly strong enough to serve as certain ground for interpreting one set in light of another set.

I do think I see such a principle, namely the uniquely foundational love of the Trinity which also serves as the one and only ground of morality and ethics--against which love, not coincidentally, we act when we are sinning! When all contextual exegetics are said and done, and I am left with ambiguous results in some cases, then I check to see if one or another interpretation is affirming or denying the doctrines of the Trinity (of which there are a much larger number than even most professionals keep in mind or maybe even are aware of!) If one affirms and another denies, I go with the affirmation: and I find and believe that this affirmation of the Trinity leads to universalism.

So I would say love wins, and I would mean love wins, not that love doesn't lose.

Rob says love wins, and means love may or may not win who knows but at least love doesn't lose (much less never 'plays' at all.)

A non-universalist, however, hearing someone affirm the scope and the persistence of God's salvation who also affirms very strongly that "Love Wins" in regard to "Heaven and Hell and the FATE OF EVERY PERSON **WHO HAS EVER LIVED ZOMG!!!**", is going to think... what?

...THAT THIS PERSON REALLY BELIEVES LOVE WINS IN REGARD TO HEAVEN AND HELL AND THE FATE OF EVERY PERSON WHO HAS EVER LIVED?

Ding.

BUT DESPITE THE TITLE OF ROB'S BOOK, ROB DOESN'T REALLY BELIEVE THAT? HE ONLY BELIEVES LOVE WINS IN SOME CASES AND MAY PERHAPS WIN ALTOGETHER BUT AT LEAST WILL NEVER OUTRIGHT LOSE?

Doesn't make for quite as an attention-catching book title, hm? It's still technically universalism, though.

MARKETING FOOFARAW?

Maybe. But I doubt it. Sometimes authors don't get to choose their titles, but in this case based on some things he says in-text I think he at least approved the title. And maybe chose it. And maybe insisted on it.

Whether I'm right about that or not, non-universalists are correct to be hopping up and down about him claiming universalism to be true. He's claiming universalism to be true, even if not in such words; he is not claiming "love wins" in the fashion that either Arms or Calvs might try to claim it; and he outright refuses to deny "love wins".

And he claims that non-universalists (even though not using that term) are certainly making a terrible and even ethically

horrible mistake by preaching (what amounts to one or another kind of) non-universalism.

If he walks like a duck and quacks like a duck and swims like a duck and has a bill like a duck and downy feathers like a duck and webbed feet like a duck and wings like a duck and eats the same kind of food as a duck--then he might be a baby swan who hasn't grown up yet (and doesn't believe he's a swan)! But he's still that kind of bird, and not a eagle/vulture/falcon kind of bird, nor an ostrich/moa/cassowary kind of bird. And people who think they ought to shoot ducks but not eagles or cassowaries will naturally be opening up duck season on him (even "in season and out of season" as they would believe the apostle expects against ducks!) when they hear him loudly quacking in the air overhead.

(Keeping in mind, ducks and swans can be as ill-tempered and pushy and unpleasant and even in their own ways as dangerous as the other two kinds!--I'm not borrowing nice vs. nasty bird analogies here. I think cassowaries and falcon/eagles are both excessively awesome sometimes, and at least admirably impressive even when they're being annoying or hurtful. But they aren't duck/swan/goose types of bird, nor vice versa.)

ENOUGH QUACKING THEN! ARE YOU GOING TO BE DONE ANYTIME SOON?

Not unless you don't want to read a summary and commentary of the book.

... {TRYING TO PARSE OUT THE GRAMMAR OF THAT REPLY...} UH... SURE? WAIT, YOU MEAN ALL THAT WASN'T THE SUMMARY AND COMMENTARY??? OH HELL...

I'll move along quickly. Relatively quickly. Part 3, next.

Part 3: A Really Short Review (And Why It Won't Be Short)

SO, HOW MANY CHAPTERS DOES THIS THING HAVE ANYWAY?

Nine, including the preface which for all practical purposes is its own chapter. The whole thing runs just short of 200 pages total. It's a bit larger than I was expecting, actually.

NO, WE MEANT YOUR FAQ. BUT... EEEEEK!--PLEASE TELL US YOU WEREN'T ANSWERING CONCERNING YOUR FAQ!?!?

No no! This FAQ didn't have a preface, silly.

WHEW, GOOD.

Although the FAQ may run that long, too, for all I know. We'll see. (At the time I'm posting this Part, I'm only almost done with commenting on his Chapter 2. Almost. Also, now that I think of it, I did have a preface post in a way... Wow, maybe you should be going eek. {grin})

WHAT!?! THAT'S RIDICULOUS!

I'm hoping (somewhat desperately by now!) I can speed things up as I get to later chapters, where (if I recall correctly) I'll have less to complain about. Though I may still have quite a bit to defend Rob about.

(Hindsight note: there ended up being ten parts to this review! So, yes, panic.)

SIGH. CAN YOU REVIEW THE BOOK REALLY REALLY FAST SO WE DON'T HAVE TO READ THE REST OF THIS?!

I was impressed with some of it, and even thought some parts were brilliant. I was also vastly disappointed with other parts. Some parts were meh. I think it's a useful book, and I'm glad we have it. I also don't blame his opponents for trying to lynch him in regard to some things. The end. {smile}

...WE'RE GOING TO BE SORRY IF WE ASK FOR MORE DETAILS THAN THAT, AREN'T WE?

{pointing to the rest of the review and commentary} {wry grin}

YOU DO REALIZE HE WASN'T WRITING A TOME OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, RIGHT?

Yep! I'm not disappointed he isn't doing what he wasn't trying to do. I think I can accurately say I don't critique him on a single technical point in the review / commentary I've written so far (as of when I posted this Part); and from what I recall of later chapters I don't plan on doing so later either.

On the other hand, I do think it's important to point out sometimes when his--

SO EXPLAIN WHY YOU WROTE NINE PAGES WORTH OF PART 2, IF THAT WASN'T A TECHNICAL COMPLAINT!! BECAUSE IT SURE LOOKED (BORINGLY) TECHNICAL!

It also wasn't part of the review and commentary, as I joked about at the time.

And my critique of Rob there, insofar as there was a critique--

YOU CALLED HIM LOOSEY-GOOSEY AS A THEOLOGIAN COMPARED TO TECHNICALLY DETAILED ONES!

I also compared his results favorably with those same three giants in the field, each representative and well-respected in their huge branches of Christian communion. Not bad for a loosey-goosey 'popular' theologian, hm?

BUT WHY BOTHER WITH IT AT ALL INSTEAD OF STARTING THE REVIEW?!

Because typically the first thing anyone interested in the book wants to know, pro or con, is whether Rob Bell is a universalist. That question precedes their interest in the book either way; and that question is the angle his publicists (at least) have been marketing the book on (which is why that's the first thing anyone interested in the book wants to know, pro or con).

Yet why is there even a question on this? Why isn't it instantly obvious and agreed on all sides, including by Rob himself, whether he is or is not a universalist?

Go ahead, guess. I'll wait. You should need only one guess.

BECAUSE HIS THEOLOGY (AT LEAST IN THE BOOK) IS KIND OF LOOSEY-GOOSEY AND THEREFORE UNCLEAR ON THE TOPIC?

Ding.

Granted, even the Big Three Bs are kind of unclear on the topic, despite their theologies being far more technically detailed than Rob's (in rather different ways compared to each other). As it happens they have similar reasons, with Rob, for the unclarity, though not always the same underlying rationales. Bulgakov is trying to avoid taking a teaching position on a point that his communion authoritatively avoids taking a teaching position on without an official Council to debate the matter--a Council that won't be forthcoming for important religio-political reasons related to the hope of reconciling with the Roman Catholic Church someday instead of further driving schism between them. Balthasar, as a loyal Roman Catholic, is (understandably) trying to avoid going up against

papal dogma against universalism. Barth is closer to Rob's Protestant reluctance on this: he just thinks he isn't a universalist if he denies certainty on the success (and maybe wants to avoid having his work thrown away by association.) None of them, including Rob, even want to be categorized as "hopeful universalists" (though Bulgakov comes closest to being an exception at the end of *The Bride of Christ*). Hopeful yes. Hopeful universalist, no. Even though they are. {smile}

BUT THEN BELL DECIDED TO PROMOTE THE TEASE OF THE QUESTION.

Which can't help but look suspicious to his opponents, compared to the reticence of Barth (for example), or Moltmann for that matter (another hugely well-respected Protestant systematic theologian who's kind-of-a-universalist but doesn't promote himself on the tease of this. Or not to the same extent Rob has been doing.)

There has been a lot of confusion in the press and among commentators (and opponents) as to whether Rob Bell is teaching (and preaching!) universalism or not. He says not. Other people say yes or no or they don't know. His opponents especially are saying "Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, Yyyessssssssss! {pant pant}"

Accounting for that confusion with respect to all sides, took some time; and I needed to do it first because that's the first question people have on what's going on. I could have written "Yes, Rob Bell is a universalist, but he's trying not to be, the end glory hallelujah," but my mere sayso wouldn't (and shouldn't) count for much. Especially since my own sympathies might lead me to say so for sake of wish fulfillment.

BUT WHY BOTHER TRYING TO ANSWER ANY SUCH QUESTIONS AT ALL??
CAN'T YOU JUST GLORY IN THE VAGUE TACIT AMBIGUITY OF THE BEAUTY OF THE QUESTIONS ETC.?!

Uh, no.

But this brings me to a point I'll be talking more about as I go along (especially in Rob's opening chapters), but which has a bearing here on why this review and commentary is so lengthy.

Rob asks a lot of questions. A little more accurately, he throws out a lot of questions. He does try to provide answers to some of them, but on the internet this kind of behavior is also called topic spamming: the human mind naturally just gets overwhelmed into not even trying to consider the answers to all those questions, and people often use that result to try to make arguments by implied innuendo.

Setting aside (but not for long) the question (and answer!) of whether Rob is using his topic spamming for that purpose--if we take seriously any respect for the questions as more than a convenient rhetorical fog to hide behind, then we try to deal

with the various answers to those questions pro or con. But it takes much, much longer to do that than to ask the questions in the first place.

I am not going to be going much into the technical issues, thus I am not in fact going to try to discuss and answer all those questions.

But in choosing to proceed this way, Rob himself is either inviting vastly much more discussion on what he's writing about, or he's only using a rhetorical trick to cheat his readers.

And regardless of which one (or both?) of those answers is true, the cold fact of the matter is that Rob's defenders have often appealed to just that principle: all he's doing is asking questions!--why are his opponents getting so angry?--he isn't doing anything wrong!--this shows just how oppressive they are, that they're scared of a bunch of questions! Etc.!

All right, fine. Can we question Rob in return then? Or not?

If not, then when did Rob become Pope?--and why should any Protestant or Eastern Orthodox Christian (much less any Roman Catholic Christian!) accept him as such?

If so: then the answers to those questions might or might not turn out to be problematic for Rob.

That's how fair inquiry works. And fair inquiry takes time and effort.

If the problem is that a fair inquiry might turn up problems...? Well, too bad.

BUT DON'T YOU REALIZE ROB BELL HAS HELPED A BUNCH OF PEOPLE COME TO ACCEPT CHRIST AND COME CLOSER TO CHRIST??

Yes I do, and I'm glad for that! You know who else has helped a bunch of people come to accept Christ and come closer to Christ? A bunch of non-universalists. Many of whom are concerned that Rob isn't helping people accept Christ and come closer to Christ. Whereas Rob is concerned that those non-universalists are failing in much the same way.

Just as it isn't fair to simply ignore Rob's concerns in order to pay attention to other people's concerns about Rob, it isn't fair to simply ignore other people's concerns about Rob in order to pay attention to Rob's concerns about other people.

Let me put it another way. I called this a "fraternally anticipated question" list. That wasn't only because I intended to use the "ALL CAPS" portions to (hopefully somewhat humorously) anticipate concerns and responses from a potentially

hostile audience of my Christian figurative-brothers (aside from whether they would bother to acknowledge me as a brother or not--and even aside from whether they're non-universalist or not!)

I also called it that because I am (somewhat humorously) anticipating concerns and questions from my literal brother: an intelligent, mission-minded servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is not only a non-universalist (as I once was), but is deeply concerned about universalists being Christian at all (as I once was) and maybe even leading people astray to damnation. My brother is concerned about me being hurt by people like Rob Bell, because he loves me. And he's concerned about other people being hurt by people like Rob Bell (and like myself for that matter!), because he loves them. And all this because he loves God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

Now if my literal brother is being unfair to Rob Bell in various ways, especially while accusing him of crimes against God and against other people, am I supposed to give him a pass because he's my brother and I love him and he's helping people come to Christ himself?

If not my literal brother, or my Christian non-universalist brothers, then what if my Christian universalist brother is being unfair to non-universalists in various ways, especially while accusing them of crimes against God and against other people?

When non-universalists are being unfair to universalists, they're being unfair to my friends and Christian brothers and sisters. But when universalists are being unfair to non-universalists, they aren't only being unfair to my friends and Christian brothers and sisters, they're being unfair to my literal family!

(Much the same way: when non-Christians are being unfair to Christians, they're not only being unfair to my friends, they're being unfair to my family. Whereas, when Christians are being unfair to non-Christians, there's a good chance they're being unfair to my most beloved under God!--and to the ones, and the one, whom she loves most!!)

If Rob Bell was only some internet commentator (like for example myself {wry grin}), this wouldn't be so much of a problem. But he was already influentially famous worldwide, and now is substantially moreso after publishing *Love Wins*. He had a chance to help make peace between us.

And my complaints, at bottom, are going to be--not that he failed to be technically proficient (except where this adds to the confusions and problems)--but that in various ways he has kept the cycle of hatred going, when he could have very easily acted to help stop that cycle, while still critting problems.

I'm going to say a lot of good things about what Rob does in the book. I'm going to defend him from oppositional criticism several times along the way. But I was terribly, terribly disappointed in how he proceeded on some issues--not related to his technical theology (or not primarily so), but related to his treatment of his opposition. I cannot in good faith, in good faithfulness to the righteous fair-togetherness of our Lord, let that pass. I think it's something his supporters just aren't willing to hear from his opponents (who are naturally sensitive to such things). Someone who supports what he's doing (more or less) needs to say something.

People are listening to Rob Bell. And non-universalists are not listening to him on some things--maybe because it's too inconvenient, but also partly because he makes things harder sometimes, not easier, by being evasive. And, I think it must be said, also because he cheats--and they're rightfully upset about that.

Universalists are also not listening to him sometimes. We have to listen to the problems as well as to the things we agree with. We aren't being faithful first to God if we don't. We're being faithful first to Rob Bell.

The road of justice requires us to be fair and loving to our enemies, even if we have to oppose them. That is one of the toughest lessons in the world to learn (or beyond the world either). It's a fundamental truth, grounded in God. We deny it at our own peril: our own salvation from sin absolutely depends on that truth being applied in our favor; and our own salvation from sin absolutely depends on that truth being applied in our enemy's favor, too.

Is Rob Bell being fair to his enemies in *Love Wins*?

No. By and large, and I grieve to say so, no he is not.

That is a huge problem. Not least because the hope of universal salvation is directly connected to the principle of fairness and love being fulfilled even to the enemies of God--to 'them' not only to 'us'.

Fortunately, I can report that Rob is certainly somewhat aware of this--and makes good use of it, too!

Unfortunately, Rob is not yet aware of this enough. And that is causing problems and hostility in our culture as people take up arms around him, for him or against him.

And that's why I'm writing a long review and commentary.

Which will start next in part 4.

Part 4: Tireing Of Suspicious Innuendo And Personal Relationships

Behold!--after an eonian age, the review finally begins! {grin}

FINE, GET TO IT THEN! WHAT'S THE PREFACE ABOUT? ANYTHING IMPORTANT?

Yes: the Preface is where Rob disses other Christian teachers the hardest for not teaching Christianity rightly like he's going to do now. Also this is where first tries (and maybe tries hardest) to make himself part of a silent majority (or anyway a respectably large minority). Thus the title of the preface "Millions of Us".

THAT SOUNDS VAGUELY THREATENING!

He's trying to reassure his reader that if she has been having doubts about the standard teaching of hopelessness of salvation after death, then the reader is far from alone, even among people who believe in God and in Christ.

Still, one could be forgiven for thinking this sounds like a warning manifesto in some ways. Jesus' story has been hijacked! Jesus isn't interested in telling those other stories that the hijackers have hijacked his story with! It's time to reclaim the plot from the misguided toxic teaching these teachers have insisted on! And beware, you treacherous teachers of poison, because there are millions of us to reckon with!

He does not say the last part, fortunately.

DOES HE MENTION HERE THAT HE HIMSELF THINKS THOSE SAME TEACHERS MANAGED TO GET A LOT OF THINGS RIGHT THAT HE HIMSELF AGREES WITH?

Hell no. (sigh)

THAT SOUNDS JUST LIKE HOW MANY OF HIS VOCAL OPPONENTS INSIST ON TREATING HIM!

Yeah, insert irony here as appropriate. "The love of God for every single one of us" may "compel us to question some of the dominant stories that are being told as the Jesus story", but apparently that same love of God for every single one of us doesn't compel us to be fair to our opposition when crucifying them. So to speak.

I also have to say that when I read his next paragraph, which starts with "I've written this book because the kind of faith Jesus invites us into doesn't skirt the big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgment and heaven and hell", I came pretty close to flinging the book away (or the electronic equivalent thereof)--because all I could think of

right that moment was how in the interviews I had seen before reading his book he kept skirting the big questions about exactly those topics when challenged on them! (Though from what I've heard he may be doing better since then...)

SOUNDS LIKE POST-MODERN DRIVEL ABOUT THE BEAUTY OF QUESTIONS AND QUESTIONS HERE AND QUESTIONS THERE AND HOW IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ARE ETC. ETC.

Wow, sounds like you read the first couple of chapters, too!
{big grin}

LUCKY GUESS.

Well, to be fair he does later in the book try to provide answers, sort of, to a lot of those questions; and I can even say he has some real success at it.

ALTHOUGH OF COURSE AS A UNIVERSALIST YOU'D BE BOUND TO SAY SO ANYWAY.

I'm also a picky technical guy who doesn't accept an argument simply because it happens to be convenient to something I otherwise believe. Questioning is as questioning does, after all. {wry grin}

But yeah, this preface was leaving a bad and suspicious taste in my mouth. It's a wild oversimplification at best, for example, to justify his "questioning" tendencies by claiming that Jesus responds to almost every question He's asked with a question.

The question, of course, is whether any questions being asked have well-grounded and valid answers--or even if any answers are being given at all. If not, then all those "responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insight... that's been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents"--it's all for nothing, except maybe for subjective entertainment purposes.

Despite Rob's rhetorical coloring, though, I do think he mainly wants to try to comfort people who have felt damned for daring not to be satisfied with the answers (much moreso the lack of answers) they've been given for their questioning.

He also rather vaguely tries to imply that just because many people before him have taught and celebrated what he's doing, that this in itself somehow makes what he's doing "orthodox".

BUT DIDN'T YOU SAY YOU THINK HE'S ORTHODOX?! OR AT LEAST WHAT HE ENDS UP SAYING EVEN IF HE TRIES TO NOT SAY WHAT HE ENDS UP SAYING? OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT!?

Yes, but not because a bunch of people before him, and long before him, have taught the same thing! People have taught

Arianism and modalism of various types, too, for centuries and millennia, but that doesn't mean I think they're actually in orthodox Christianity (much less correct) for doing so!

His rhetorical construction is conveniently sloppy here, too. So, Rob, your "teaching" isn't "any kind of departure from what's been said an untold number of times" is it? Because I possess this thing called 'memory', and it tells me that the whole point of the first part of your preface, a couple of pages ago (pages I also possess by the way), was that *you're departing from what has been said an untold number of times and damned skippy it ought to be departed from!* Because that other teaching, taught by the majority to the overwhelming majority an untold number of times, is toxic and a crime against Jesus etc.

So that other stuff you forcibly reject as horrible and false and "I would never be a part of that"--does that fit into your appeal to the "beauty of the historic, orthodox Christian faith" and its "deep, wide, diverse stream that's been flowing for thousands of years, carrying a staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences" "in all its vibrant, diverse, messy, multivoiced complexity"?

Or, not?

Just how "thrilled" are you Rob, to be introducing people to the majority beliefs as well as to the minority? Because back two pages ago you didn't seem thrilled at all.

This type of attitude that "the majority is trash but we should appreciate all views for their contributions especially mine" grates me, because it's merely a rhetorical convenience. Until he actually puts his precept into practice and starts pointing out the contributions of those other people he is mouthing against, then I have no problem standing on the side of those people and calling 'shenanigans'.

And thus ends the preface. Had I not thought I had an obligation as a leader and teacher on this site to comment on this work due to its instant popularity, I would have deleted it from my Kindle right there.

Fortunately some shreds of intellectual discipline kept me at it; and as a result, I remind my reader, I did come away from the book with a better opinion of it than this. Eventually.

EVENTUALLY? SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE SAYING IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER IN CHAPTER 1.

It does, but not at first.

He throws a bunch of thought-provoking questions at the reader, none of them bad questions in themselves. But without much

reference to typical answers, his design leaves an effect of suggesting ridiculousness or even abhorrence to the implied answers without the bother of considering typical answers.

I don't like it when sceptics deploy this type of "argument by suspicious innuendo", and I like it even less when someone I largely agree with does it.

CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF NOT LIKING IT EVEN THOUGH YOU AGREE WITH HIM?

Certainly!

I do my own share of complaining about the non-universalist "gospel of hopelessness" in its various forms; so I can't say I disagree much (if at all!) with what he's ultimately aiming at when he complains about the Christian who remarks to the friend of an atheist, at the atheist's funeral, "So there's no hope then."

(I would give page numbers but I have a Kindle copy, and Kindle despises page-numbering as a bourgeois luxury or something. {wry grin} I mean it's a technical limitation to their proprietary format--that they haven't managed to overcome yet after three system generations. {ahem} Anyone who wants to volunteer the numbers in the comments please do so, along with what edition you're referencing in case the pagination differs between editions.)

The difference is that I try to do so in context with what the non-universalist is actually claiming. And I have never even implied, at any time, that any non-universalist thinks or is trying to say that "the Christian message" is "there is no hope".

It is simply and utterly straw-manning the opposition to ask, without discussion of the answers mind you (and so implying that this is actually what is happening), **"Is this the sacred calling of Christians--to announce that there's no hope?"**

Arminianistic and Calvinistic Christians (Protestant or otherwise) both would bleed out their eyes at being effectively libeled like this, and rightly so. Of course they announce a hope of salvation! They mix that hope with real and final hopelessness, in various ways (because in various ways they think hopelessness truly is as real and final as God's hope, and they're trying to be true to the hopelessness they believe to be the truth); but they don't just announce "no hope". That's needlessly insulting at best.

Rob Bell cannot possibly be so ignorant. I know he has to be actually complaining about the acknowledgment and promotion of final victorious hopelessness as well as hope in Arm and Calv

theology (whether the final victory of hopelessness is the sinner's victory or is God's!)

Consequently, he chose, willfully chose, to paint Arms and Calvs this way, as though all they were doing was announcing "no hope" as the gospel of Jesus Christ.

JESUS CHRIST!--THAT'S... KIND OF EVIL!! AS IN, 'INTENTIONALLY BEARING FALSE WITNESS AGAINST HIS NEIGHBOR' KIND-OF-EVIL!

Yeah, I'm willing to grant a lot of leeway to Rob's opponents if they want to zorch him with flaming hammers concerning this. It is exactly as bad, not remotely less so, as the type of straw-man burning routinely tossed off libelously by non-universalists against seriously dogmatic Christian universalists. Sauce for their goose is sauce for his gander if he does it, too. "But they're doing it too!" is not a good excuse.

AND YET THERE ARE UNIVERSALISTS WHO THINK THIS BOOK IS THE BEE'S KNEES??

The book does get better later, even a lot better. (I have to keep reminding myself of this as I read back through it again for my review and commentary... {wry grin})

IS THERE ANYTHING GOOD AT ALL IN THIS CHAPTER THOUGH??

Quite a lot, I'd say!

I like where he goes immediately after this libel. It's still the same tactic of asking questions without really going into whether there are good answers for them (which "churns" my own stomach, since he mentioned that effect back in the preface); but it also more-than-a-little skillfully gets across why there is a lot of discussion among Christians on the issues raised by claiming various things: starting from a question about whether there is such a thing as an "age of accountability" and various doctrinal variants that this question leads to in trying to answer it.

This goes on throughout most of the rest of the chapter, and I can say as a compliment that it reaches practically epic levels. I especially like how he develops the point that you might have people rejecting Jesus because of how His followers lived, and how this is connected to the attempt to simply solve the prior questions by saying "all that matters is how you respond to Jesus."

SO THAT'S ROB'S ANSWER? SEEMS DOCTRINALLY WIMPY!

Oh no no no, the "all that matters" isn't Rob's answer, even though he strongly agrees that (from the side of the sinner) it is "about how you respond to Jesus". On the contrary, he then starts critiquing the doctrinally wimpy way of trying to deploy

that answer!--and at the same time illustrates just how totally bleeped-up (sometimes literally "bleeped", replacing a sexual curse word for the bleep) the "Jesus" can be that people are expected to "respond to".

Rob emphatically emphasizes that some Jesuses (Jesuii?) should be rejected; and that's a question of claims rightly or wrongly representing Jesus--thus a claim about ortho-doxy (right representation).

This is worth emphasizing because any opponent who tries to paint Rob as not caring about correct doctrine (especially concerning Jesus) is flatly outright wrong. Rob strongly cares for what is and is not correct claims about Jesus--which after all is one big reason for why he is writing this book!

SO... YOU THINK THIS PART OF THE CHAPTER IS BETTER?

Muchly so, yep! Even though I still don't like the style; or to be more precise, I don't like how he uses the style elsewhere (which leads him into temptation occasionally here, too.)

CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF THAT?

Ohhhhh yes, sadly I can.

As I said earlier, the strongest point (of many) in this epic portion of the chapter is that salvation (at all, and much moreso from hopeless damnation) ends up being not nearly as simple a matter as readers may have been led to believe; and one of the simpler attempts at cutting through the knots (in order to save non-universalism from the complexity of the questions) just as simply doesn't work under scrutiny. (Not without hinting at post-mortem salvation opportunities of some sort at the least!)

On the other hand: a lot of theologians throughout church history have in fact tried to take these complexities into account, and have thus tried to teach their congregations already what to expect and how the complexities are dealt with. Be those attempts right or wrong, the attempts do already exist and ought to be examined as to their theological coherency, and their data coherency (how well they square with scriptural data for example).

But Rob elides past all that (and won't be going much into details later either), treating the mere questioning process as though it instantly calls into ridiculousness all such attempts at solving the issues in favor of keeping hopeless damnation. That isn't a fair examination of the issues. Using questions to bring out problematic details is fair enough (as far as it goes); using questions to make an argument from suspicious innuendo is cheating (to put it bluntly).

SOUNDS LIKE A RHETORICAL TRICK TO IMPRESS THE GROUNDINGS...

That's putting it rather harshly. But I couldn't blame an opponent if they put it that harshly.

SOUNDS LIKE BELL IS DOING WHAT HE'S BASICALLY BLAMING HIS OWN OPPONENTS FOR DOING!

Not in so many words. But yep.

SOUNDS LIKE RAMPANT HYPOCRISY!!

Again, I couldn't blame an opponent if they put it that harshly.

AREN'T YOU GOING TO DEFEND IT AS A NECESSARY SIMPLICITY TO REACH READERS WHO DON'T HAVE THE TASTE OR SKILL OR TALENT OR TIME FOR DEEP EXEGETICS AND WIRE-THIN METAPHYSICAL ANALYSIS?!

If he was being fair to his opponents, I would feel better about defending it as that. But, well...

HE ISN'T.

He isn't.

COULD THIS PERHAPS BE ONLY AN ACCIDENT OF COMPOSITION?

Up to page whatever (thanks Kindle! {thbbbt!}) when he starts talking about "personal responsibility", I might have been willing to allow that the resulting implied argument from suspicious innuendo was an accidental side-effect of his epic hashing-out of various details that the reader may never have bothered to contemplate.

But then he brings up another attempt at over-simply cutting through the knot of those questions (by someone defending non-universalism thereby): "the real issue, the one that can't be avoided, is whether a person has a 'personal relationship' with God through Jesus. [...] That's the bottom line [according to these defenders]: a personal relationship. If you don't have that, you will die apart from God and spend eternity in torment in hell."

DOES HE PRETEND THAT SUCH DEFENDERS DON'T RECOGNIZE, AS LEWIS DID, THAT GOD HAS PLENTY OF WAYS OF TRYING TO SET UP A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH PEOPLE ASIDE FROM MERELY HUMAN EVANGELISM?!

No, he acknowledges that such defenders (may) acknowledge this. (And by the way, his representation of their defense of the scope of God's resources and abilities to reach sinners, sounds quite Lewisian! He might even have Lewis specifically in mind; he's clearly a fan.)

DOES HE CLAIM THAT A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD ISN'T NECESSARY FOR A PERSON TO BE SAVED!?

Oh no, he'll spend the rest of the book affirming this in various ways himself.

SO... HE AGREES WITH THIS DEFENSE, THEN?

One might have supposed so. Except that he doesn't agree with the hopeless eternity in torment part, of course.

SO, DOES HE SAY THE ONLY PROBLEM IS THAT SOMEONE COULD EASILY AND ENTIRELY AGREE WITH THIS WITHOUT HAVING TO ALSO AGREE WITH THE HOPELESS ETERNITY IN TORMENT PART?

Nope. He could have very easily pointed this out. But he tries something else instead.

SO WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM WITH THAT DEFENSE!?

"The problem, however, is that the phrase 'personal relationship' is found nowhere in the Bible."

...WHAT?

I kid you not. That's his "problem" with this defense.

...THAT IS THE LAMEST TYPE OF CRITIQUE EVER!!

Words fail me at how unutterably cheap a blow this is. How many times in the last twenty years have I seen people, whether sceptics or believers, whether universalists or non-universalists, attempt to avoid a point by claiming "that word or phrase is found nowhere in the Bible"? They might as well be hanging a sign around their neck reading "I am a loser and this is the best I can come up with! Please ignore me with all haste!"

DOES BELL DENY THAT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE FOUND IN THE BIBLE?!

No.

DOES BELL DENY THAT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD ARE FOUND IN THE BIBLE?!?

No.

DOES BELL DENY THAT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD ARE TREATED AS BEING EXTREMELY IMPORTANT IN THE BIBLE?!?!?

No.

DOES BELL DENY THAT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD ARE TREATED IN THE BIBLE NOT ONLY AS BEING EXTREMELY IMPORTANT BUT NECESSARILY RELATED (IN ONE OR MORE WAYS) TO SALVATION?!?!?

No.

He affirms each and every one of those propositions--when it's time to promote his idea. I can accurately report that the rest of his book is practically crawling with references to the importance of personal relationships, including in our salvation by God. (I would list them here, but I'll probably mention them along the way--with a sarcastic callback to this wretched tactic.)

YOU MUST HAVE FELT LIKE WANTING TO HURL THE BOOK AWAY AGAIN!

Yes.

There is no excuse for that attempt. None. It makes less than no sense on multiple levels.

I have some sympathy for non-trinitarians (for example) who want to just get around all the tough exegetical issues, or who at least want to alert people (if they don't know already) that the doctrine is based on sifting through a bunch of tough exegetical issues (instead of being written out clearly as a proof-text somewhere), by pointing out that the word "Trinity" isn't found in the Bible. It's still kind of a cheap move, and it's especially pointless to make that move against theologians who have bothered to do the exegetical pushups, but at least there's a modicum of justification for doing so. And at least they're doing so because they don't believe the concept they're denying, and don't believe the concept can be found in the Bible either.

But Rob actually agrees about Biblical testimony to the importance of having personal relationships with God. One of the great strengths of his book, is that he helps readers understand the importance of personal relationships between God and man (as well as between man and man under God). He even agrees later (when trying to avoid being a universalist!) that so long as someone refuses to have a personal relationship with God, there's going to be increasing torment (in various ways) as a result!--and this torment isn't ever going to just automatically run out or end! It could, and will, keep going for as long as the sinner holds out against repenting and coming to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, even if that's forever!

Rob himself affirms all this!

Yet here, his "problem" is supposed to be that the phrase "personal relationship" is found nowhere in the Bible. Apparently because a non-universalist dared to refer to the concept, too. Jesus wept.

WE COULD AT LEAST HOPE THAT PEOPLE WOULDN'T BE IMPRESSED BY THIS FLAGRANTLY CHEATING TACTIC!

By the time I downloaded the book to my Kindle, that sentence had been highlighted by more than 890 Kindle readers. I may be mis-remembering that no other portion of the book was underlined by so many Kindlers, but I feel pretty safe in saying I recall it being in the top three.

(Rob also casually in passing mentions a concept, treating it as if it was a well-known or at least established fact, that a woman wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. He does this while rhetorically and less-than-uselessly emphasizing that Jesus and various NT authors never used the phrase "personal relationship". Pretending that it's already well-established that a woman wrote EpistHeb, in order to blow people's minds and check if they're paying attention, since after all there is a huge debate over who actually wrote that text with a wide number of theories, might have been clever and amusing had he done so elsewhere, like when actually citing EpistHeb. Doing so here can only tar that theory--which I personally have never heard of before, but which for all I know may have some respectable merits--with shame by association.)

IT SOUNDS LIKE WE COULD PRETTY MUCH STOP READING YOUR COMMENTARY NOW (AFTER, LORD SAVE US, 28 PAGES?!) AND REJECT THIS BOOK AS TWADDLE!

You'd be missing some great material from Rob's book if you rejected it as twaddle. But I wouldn't blame you if you did.

SO IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS CHAPTER WORTH COMPLIMENTING? OR IS IT ALL FOO FARAW FROM HERE UNTIL WHENEVER?

Weirdly, after attempting this asinine point, Rob thinks it "raises another question", although logically there is no direct connection between this next question and his preceding topic (which makes me suspect that the preceding topic, about the phrase "personal relationship" not appearing in the Bible and this supposedly being a problem for non-universalists trying to appeal to the concept, was added in at a much later stage of composing this chapter; maybe while he was whacked out of his gourd on allergy medicine...)

...UM... THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE IT'S WORTH COMPLIMENTING...

Oh the next point itself is entirely worth complimenting; I just wanted to point out its clumsy connection to the preceding topic.

Aside from that clumsy transition, Rob puts it quite well: "If the message of Jesus is that God is offering the free gift of eternal life through him--a gift we cannot earn by our own

efforts, works or good deeds--and all we have to do is accept and confess and believe, aren't those verbs? And aren't verbs actions? Accepting, confessing, believing--those are things we do."

He backs this up with reference to some Gospel incidents where Jesus has amazing approval and even salvific acceptance of people who don't "confess" much per se, even though they clearly have a positive personal relationship with Christ. (Rob doesn't bother to complain here that the phrase "personal relationship" doesn't appear in the Bible in regard to those people, even though they clearly have some trusting personal relationship with Jesus!)

BUT ISN'T THAT CONVENIENTLY AND/OR IGNORANTLY OVERSIMPLIFYING THE GOSPEL TESTIMONIES?!

It would be if Rob stopped there; but to his credit Rob goes on to list several other categories of example, all of which involve actions by people in relation to salvation, although in a few cases the action is taken by people other than the one being saved!

BUT WASN'T HE JUST DENYING A MINUTE AGO THAT WE SHOULD HAVE TO DO ANYTHING IF THE GRACE OF GOD FREELY SAVES US WITHOUT HAVING TO EARN IT?

I think in this case he was only trying to acknowledge that the situation is wider with more options than people often realize. He pushes this point to epic levels again, quite brilliantly. (Which only makes me wish more that he hadn't taken time out from his previous brilliant epic-ness to drop that snot-loogie of a tactic in between!)

What does salvation depend on in the Gospels (and New Testament, but mostly he gives examples from the Gospels)?

"Is it what you say, or who you are, or what you do, or what you say you're going to do, or whether you stand firm in what you say you're going to do, or who your friends are, or who you're married to, or whether you given birth to children, or what questions you are asked, or what questions you ask in return, or is it the tribe, or family, or ethnic group you're born into?"

Rob gives examples of all those. (Though his loose application of a few could be exegetically challenged.)

To the person who tries to cut through those complexities again with a simple "just believe", Rob again brilliantly replies that the one group of persons who most constantly believe from the beginning Who Jesus is and what He is up to... are the demons! But as Saint James says in his epistle, that doesn't mean they're on His side!

And so ends Chapter 1, with the observation that there are many more questions at stake than Rob's readers might have been aware of, and with a promise that he's going to look for answers.

AND CHEAT ALONG THE WAY.

No, he doesn't promise he'll do that; but the reader might be forgiven for expecting that, too. Sigh.

SO WHAT ABOUT THE TIRE?

...the what?

THE TIRE. THE CHAPTER TITLE WAS "WHAT ABOUT THE FLAT TIRE?"

Oh that! That was one of his questions in passing: what if the missionary has a flat tire on the way to witness to someone and the someone dies?

BUT THEY AREN'T DAMNED BECAUSE THE MISSIONARY DIDN'T GET THERE IN TIME!--THEY'RE DAMNED FOR BEING A SINNER!

I know, and Rob doesn't really cover that in this chapter (which could be considered a point against him.)

The question does however raise a couple of issues important to both Arminians and Calvinists. A Calvinist would say not to worry, because the person was either pre-elected or pre-dis-elected; the flat tire might have actually been sent by God so the missionary wouldn't waste his time on that particular sinner who was never going to be saved anyway. Rejoice! Whereas if God chose to save that sinner, He must not have planned to use that particular missionary as part of the process.

An Arminian would say (perhaps not quite this bluntly) too bad, God just wasn't strong enough to make sure that person was saved from their sins--but God will certainly be strong enough to make sure that person is damned for their sins! Rejoice!

Or the Arm would say don't worry, God is strong and competent enough to make sure one way or another that the person has a chance to accept Christ, even if that particular missionary doesn't make it there in time.

Rob only barely touches those issues in this chapter (and not near the tire question), but neither does he acknowledge (especially near the tire question) that Arms and Calvs both do have serious concerns about the tire question, too!

I know they sometimes address those concerns in heartbreaking ways; and I don't merely mean my heart breaks to hear them address those concerns. I remember hearing an Arminian missionary weeping grievously as he shamefully recounted how he had turned away a young woman at his door who wanted to talk to

him, because he was too tired and too busy (with his personal things), asking her to come back tomorrow--and she died before tomorrow. He was stricken to think that he was part of the reason she went to hell. We had some Calvinists in the group listening to this, and they mentioned afterward that a Calvinist would never have to worry about that while doing mission work. Which led to a spirited discussion between the group's Arms and Calvs about why Calvs would bother doing mission work at all!-- which I thought the Calvs had some good answers to. (But then I was familiar with both sides already.)

My point here, though, is that both sides do take the tire question seriously. They don't just ignore it.

(Whereas Rob, in this chapter, kind of ignores the fact that both sides don't ignore the tire question and instead take it very seriously, each in their own way.)

BUT YOU SAY THE BOOK DOES GET BETTER, RIGHT?

Somewhat. On to chapter 2!

WAIT WAIT WAIT, HOLD UP: AREN'T YOU GOING TO COVER THE GHANDI REFERENCE?

Why?

...WELL... UH... WELL, IT'S PRETTY (IN)FAMOUS BY NOW, AND BELL LED OUT HIS PROMOTIONAL VIDEO FOR THE BOOK TALKING ABOUT IT...

Okay: this is the chapter he talks about Ghandi, and he leads out his questions with "Really? Ghandi's in hell? Someone knows this for certain?" etc. But overall it's a small portion of the chapter, and the issues he alludes to are discussed (or at least more suggestively alluded to) elsewhere in the chapter.

BUT GHANDI WAS NOT REALLY THAT MUCH OF A SAINT AFTER ALL!

I can confidently say in Rob's favor that he was only using Ghandi as a stock popular figure of a 'good non-Christian' (so there isn't any point complaining that he "didn't do his research" in mentioning Ghandi); and Rob was not doing so in order to try to argue (even by implication) that Ghandi had been good enough to earn his way into heaven.

However, because Rob's main strategy throughout this chapter (as well as the preface to some extent) is to throw "challenging questions" at the reader, with at least some intention of making implied arguments from suspicious innuendo along the way, he has only himself to blame if opponents totally misread his reference to Ghandi as being a typically non-Christian hidden argument to the effect that people can be good enough to earn their way into heaven without being a Christian. Admittedly, an opponent is being incompetent (or if competent enough to see it, then

uncharitable!) not to notice Rob isn't even trying to imply that argument.

But that's the problem with basing one's strategy on implied arguments from suspicious innuendo: people start seeing implied arguments from innuendo elsewhere, too.

And that can get very tire-ing. {smile}

Part 5: This Seems Like It's Going On Forever

IT GETS BETTER NOW IN CHAPTER 2, RIGHT? YOU SAID IT WAS GOING TO GET BETTER!

Even Chapter 1 was mostly good material by bulk (and even by quality. Mostly.) But yes, it gets better. After more ineptitude. Ahem.

YOU'RE GOING TO TALK ABOUT HIS GRANDMA'S WALL PAINTING NOW, AREN'T YOU?

Yep. It upsets his tender feelings. Try making some guesses why. Go ahead, try. It'll be amusing.

DOES ROB DENY THE EXISTENCE OF HELL?

Nope; in fact he's going to extend the existence of hell later! (Not deny it.) Nor will he be terribly unconventional about doing so. But more on that later.

SURELY ROB DOESN'T DENY THE EXISTENCE OF HEAVEN!?

Nope; in fact he's going to extend the existence of heaven, too, in this chapter! Nor will he be terribly unconventional about doing that either, by the way.

DOES HE DENY THAT PEOPLE ARE SAVED FROM HELL TO HEAVEN BY THE CROSS??

Not at all, although of course it's by Jesus on the cross. In that sense the painting visually represents Jesus by the cross anyway. (Not that Rob bothers to mention this here. But he does believe it.)

DOES HE DENY THAT PEOPLE ARE SAVED FROM HELL TO HEAVEN BY JESUS?!

Nope! He affirms that very strongly.

SO HE MUST BE DENYING THAT JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO HEAVEN AND THE ONLY SALVATION FROM HELL!

Nope, he affirms both of those quite strongly, too.

...OH. UMMMMM... OKAY, WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF REASONS WHY HE MUST BE UPSET WITH THE PICTURE...

You'll never guess why. But you're welcome to keep trying.
{grin}

IS HE REALLY THAT UPSET ABOUT IT?!

It upset him as a kid so much that he's willing to deploy Christ's warning about how it's better to be drowned than to cause a little child to stumble. Though he tries to deny that he really means to apply that to this picture! But the reader could be excusably excused for thinking otherwise (not least because he bothers to apply that warning to this picture.)

WOW--THE MIND BOGGLES. IT MUST BE SOMETHING DREADFUL.

So to speak.

IS THE WAY VERY NARROW? OR OBSCURE AND EASILY MISSED? OR A TWISTY GNARLED TREE TRUNK OF A CROSS THAT LOOPS AROUND IN WEIRD SHAPES?

No no, not at all. It's comfortably broad and straight and obvious. No one is at the least risk of falling off, even walking multiple people abreast (despite it lacking handrails for safety. Must not have been a Calvinist who painted it... {grin})

IS THE WAY WEAK LOOKING, LIKE IT COULD BREAK DOWN ANY TIME?

Not hardly!--it looks vastly more solid and stable than the hell it's leading from!

ARE PEOPLE TAKING RUNNING LEAPS OFF IT? OR WALKING BACK TO HELL ON IT, MAYBE SENT BY THE GATEKEEPER?

Nope. Also, the gates (such as they are) are totally open.

ARE PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND ON THE OTHER SIDE, PREVENTED FROM GETTING TO IT?

Nope. In fact--

ARE PEOPLE SHOWN BACK IN HELL SUFFERING HORRIBLY?

--no one is shown back in hell at all! The place looks more than anything like a burning abandoned ruin. Admittedly, no one is shown actually stepping onto the cross from hell either; but the effect (though it may be inadvertent) from the lack of population still in hell, looks more like we're watching the last people in hell finally leaving the ruin of hell behind and coming into the kingdom!

NO WAY!

Way. The Way, one might say. {big grin}

GOOD LORD, BELL OUGHT TO BE USING THIS PAINTING AS AN AMAZING EXAMPLE OF GOD'S VICTORY OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN AND THROUGH CHRIST!!!

It creeps him out.

YEAH, BUT WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM WITH IT?!

That's it. It gave him the creeps as a child.

...YOU HAVE TO BE JOKING. YOU'RE BEING SARCASTIC, RIGHT?

Yes; and sometimes one can't be sarcastic enough.

But I'm not kidding, that really was his problem, and still is. (One of two problems.) He has nothing at all good to say about that painting, and insinuates that the painter and/or his grandmother ought to be punished as harshly as possible by Christ for hanging it in their house where kids could see it.

DOES HELL AT LEAST OVERWHELM HUGE PORTIONS OF THE PAINTING???!

Nope. Easily less than a third of it. And the composition is designed to point attention away from the hellish areas (though I'll grant that this might be more obvious in the Kindle's black and white rendering). This isn't even remotely like most paintings of hell where the point is to warn you (or even merely revel in) just how nightmarishly hellish hell will be.

WELL WHAT'S HIS OTHER PROBLEM!!--DOES IT MAKE EVEN SLIGHTLY MORE SENSE?!?

The bridge is going somewhere.

...OKAY, THIS IS STARTING TO SOUND LIKE BELL IS NEUROTIC.

It does make slightly more sense, slightly. What he wants to complain about, and there's some validity to his complaint (which I'll be talking more about later), is that we tend to picture heaven and hell happening somewhere else. Thus his (other) complaint with the picture: it's happening somewhere else. Not here.

As far as Rob's concerned, though, that's the "fundamental story" being told by the painting. Not salvation through Jesus (and the cross of Jesus), not Christ's salvation being strong and safe and clear, not heaven's gates being open to all who come by Christ, not Christ being the only Way--not even (so far as the painting indicates, probably by accident) hell being left empty and abandoned thanks to the cross of Christ...!

WAIT--ISN'T HE COMPLAINING FOR MOST OF THE BOOK ABOUT CHRISTIANS NOT TEACHING AT LEAST POST-MORTEM SALVATION (IF NOT UNIVERSAL SALVATION)??!

Aye, verily.

AND YET HE'S COMPLAINING HERE ABOUT THIS PICTURE OF SALVATION
HAPPENING SOMEWHERE OTHER THAN HERE!?

Aye, verily.

SO HE'S COMPLAINING ABOUT POST-MORTEM SALVATION!--SALVATION
HAPPENING AFTER DEATH, NOT HERE IN THIS WORLD!!!

He isn't thinking that clearly, or that far ahead. Otherwise he would have seen that borrowing this picture is actually worse than useless for the point he wants to make.

BUT MAYBE HE'S ONLY TRYING TO REACH A POPULAR AND UNEDUCATED AUDIENCE AND SO HE DOESN'T THINK HE HAS TO THINK THAT CLEARLY OR THAT FAR AHEAD ABOUT WHAT HE'S TRYING TO TEACH THEM TO ACCEPT WHILE CRITIQUING OTHER PEOPLE... ABOUT... OH NEVER MIND.

Yeah, that explanation doesn't hold up as an excuse when the implications are spelled out. Also, successful popular teachers, when they're good popular teachers, bring out hidden implications in a colorful way that the general uneducated population might have missed, helping them to see and understand the issues better.

Rob can be quite good at that sometimes. Even brilliant sometimes. Here? Not so much.

SO IT REALLY COMES DOWN TO THIS PICTURE SCARING HIM WITH ITS COLORS WHEN HE WAS A CHILD, AND THIS IS HOW HE GETS HIS REVENGE ON IT!?

To be fair, I'm looking at the thing in black and white. It might look more impressive-ish in color. But as far as his application of this painting goes, yep. He wanted an excuse to vent because it creeped him out as a kid, and now by God that painting *will get what's coming to it!!!*

It's hard to avoid this conclusion, considering not only the way he himself talks about it, but also considering that there are dozens of paintings that would have made his two points (such as they are) much better. Except of course, those paintings weren't hanging on his Grandma's wall.

THIS IS NOT THE PART OF THE CHAPTER YOU SAY GETS BETTER, WE TRUST?!

Ha ha ha! No.

THANK HEAVEN! BECAUSE HIS APPLICATION OF THAT PAINTING AMOUNTS TO THE WORST KIND OF LITERAL-IMAGE-MONGERING AT BEST!

Yeahhhh... um... that continues for a while I'm afraid.

HE CONTINUES MAKING FUN OF IMAGERY OF HEAVEN AS THOUGH IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE TAKEN SUPER-LITERALLY?

Oh yes.

BUT SURELY HE KNOWS IT ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE TAKEN THAT SUPER-LITERALLY!

Oh yes. But he doesn't bother to mention that Arm and Calv teachers and scholars don't take that imagery super-literally either, and try to instruct people otherwise themselves. The closest he comes is a jibe about a dull pastor (and admittedly I've heard some clueless ones go this route) trying to tell people heaven is unlike anything we can comprehend and then using the image of "a church service that goes on forever" to try to help people comprehend it anyway.

WELL ADMITTEDLY THAT TYPE OF TEACHER IS A NIT!

Also admittedly, there are (or were) not a few people whose best ideas of a holy life involve worshiping in church. More to the point, it's a scriptural image--mostly from the Old Testament, but not to be disrespected on that account!

Rob does make a good point in passing that two people might be crying at a church service, thinking about heaven, for two very different reasons: one because she expects to be reunited with the people she loves, and the other because she expects most of the people she loves to be hopelessly lost (and probably suffering endless torments). And indeed that second woman would be "troubled and confused" if she was told that she'll be having so much fun (or joy rather, but Rob represents it merely as "fun") worshiping God that the ongoing death and destruction of the other people she loves won't matter to her: because they do matter to her now!

BUT ARMS AND CALVS HAVE VARIOUS REASONS TO EXPECT THAT TO BE TRUE!

Yes, and those reasons ought to be looked at. But Rob doesn't bother to.

SOUNDS LIKE THIS WHOLE FIRST PART OF CHAPTER 3 IS ENTIRELY AN EMOTIONAL SETUP AND APPEAL FROM BEGINNING TO END.

Yep!--not only for sake of assuaging Rob's own emotions, but for trying to introduce an important topic as if Arms and Calvs never bother to discuss it.

WHICH MEANS HE'S STILL CHEATING!

Pretty much. While sacrificing an amazing opportunity to make positive use of something that frightened him as a child,

reducing it instead to being only a puerile illustration of points he could have used much better artistic examples for.

But it does get better.

YOU KEEP SAYING THAT, Y'KNOW...

Well, leaving off his rather unfair way of getting to the topic, his main points for this chapter are still pretty good. And numerous, too:

1.) Heaven isn't only a post-mortem goal to attain to; the kingdom of God is something we ought to be also bringing about in this age right now.

SOUNDS SUSPICIOUSLY UTOPIAN!

No, he isn't only concerned about social justice in this life. (Much less some kind of theocracy!) But he is concerned about social justice in this life, too, and wants to make sure people aren't ignoring or discounting any struggle for that in this life, focusing on heaven to come instead.

BUT ARMS AND CALVS BOTH HAVE A RICH HISTORY OF STRIVING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THIS LIFE, TOO!

Yeaaaaahhhhh he kind of just ignores that.

NOT SURPRISINGLY. BECAUSE IT WOULD BLOW HIS THESIS. HE WOULD LOOK LESS LIKE HE'S OFFERING SOMETHING, BE IT TRUTH OR UTILITY OR WHATEVER, THEY DON'T AND/OR CAN'T!

To be fair, Arms and Calvs (Protestant and otherwise) do also have a bit of a history of ignoring--

BUT THEY THEMSELVES CRITIQUE THEMSELVES (AS WELL AS EACH OTHER) ON THAT OCCASIONAL FAILURE!!

I know. I'm not saying he's right to pretend otherwise. But he is right about the importance of extending 'heaven' into this life, as Arms and Calvs both can principlly agree, too! And this has some important connections to his other points. Which in turn touch on some issues non-universalists dispute universalists (and each other) about.

SUCH AS?

2.) Eternal life, or 'eonian life' to transliterate it a bit more literally, is something we Christians can and should be participating in here and now. It isn't (only) something for us after we've died and 'gone to heaven'.

OKAY, NO PROBLEM, ARMS AND CALVS BOTH OFTEN (OR AT LEAST SOMETIMES) AFFIRM AND TALK ABOUT THAT, TOO. NOT LEAST BECAUSE

THERE'S DIRECT SCRIPTURAL TESTIMONY FOR IT!--MOST OFTEN FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN.

If I told you he neglects to mention Arms and Calvs both often (or at least sometimes) affirm and talk about this, too, would you have a heart-attack from not-surprise?

NO! YES! NO... ...MAYBE. WHAT?!

Par for the course for him there (or way over par, to be more accurate to the analogy. For a golfer that's bad.) But still a good point that some of his readers could need reminding about.

BIG DEAL. AN ARM OR CALV COULD GET THAT FROM SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T PROMOTE POST-MORTEM SALVATION, MUCH LESS UNIVERSAL SALVATION, TOO!

How often would they get this next point, however?

3.) Christians who have eonian life in us still die.

...UH. WELL YEAH. BE... BECAUSE...

Because:

4.) Eonian (i.e. "eternal") life isn't primarily about living continuously forever. It's a qualitative statement first and foremost, not a quantitative one.

NOW WAIT A MINUTE...!

Waiting. {smile}

HE CAN'T MAKE THAT CRITICISM, UNLESS HE'S TRYING TO DENY THAT ETERNAL LIFE DOESN'T GO ON FOREVER AFTER WE DIE!

Sure he can. Don't other people who affirm that "eonian life" goes on forever after Christians die, still affirm Christians die despite having "eonian life" now?

YE--EAH... BUT...

Don't those same people talk about the damned continuing to live in some fashion forever? (Unless they're annihilationists?--and even then don't most annihilationists acknowledge that the wicked are resurrected first to 'eonian judgment' or 'eonian punishment' or whatever, thus first to life and then annihilation? But annihilationists do get this point better.)

YES!--BUT THAT ISN'T...

That--merely living forever--isn't eonian life. Or eonian punishment for that matter. Is it?

NO...

No. Admittedly, Rob isn't quite as good at making this point as he could be--this particular angle of illustrating point 4 is barely in the text at all (Rob prefers to make that point more from other angles, as I'll mention later). But it's still in there and worth mentioning. Living forever isn't the same thing as having eonian life, or even having eonian life forever. There aren't many theologies, trinitarian or otherwise (but especially trinitarian ones), which deny Jesus Christ of all people didn't have eonian life, and even eonian life forever. Jesus even is the Resurrection and the Life! But Jesus still died. (There are of course a few theologies which try to deny Jesus really died; they're called docetisms, and are regarded as seriously heretical by everyone else, especially the orthodox-trinitarian groups.)

This is why counter-critiques (including against Rob) pointing to the necessity of some sort of contrasting parallelism between 'eonian life' and 'eonian crisis' (or variations thereof) are simply missing the point. People who have eonian life now, in this age, still die and then go on living in the resurrection to come. People who don't have eonian life now, in this age, die but still go on living in the resurrection to come.

BUT THEY AREN'T LIVING WITH EONIAN LIFE!!

That's worth pointing out, too, but the debate then shifts to whether they ever receive eonian life later (or whether God is still even trying to give it to them). A proponent of hopelessly never-ending torment cannot logically shift back to trying to press a case-clenching meaning on the adjective 'eonian' (and related prepositional phrases like 'into the eon') being necessarily and primarily about the object of 'eonian' (or the preposition) continuing to happen never-endingly.

(I'm... pretty sure the grammar in that sentence added up...
{wry grin})

This is naturally related to another point Rob makes in this chapter.

5.) 'Eonian' does not always refer to something that continues never-endingly. It can mean that, but sometimes it's only a poetic way of saying 'a long but finite time' or even 'a time that felt like a long time, longer than it actually was'.

BUT THAT HAS TO BE ESTABLISHED BY CONTEXT!

Certainly! Which is to say that the ground of debate has to shift to contextual discussion. But a lot of weight is thrown on the term itself as evidence, by non-universalists, for non-universalism being scripturally testified as true. Rob, even if not quite as well as some other authors in past centuries (or

today for that matter), points out that this weight is falsely sold to the people in the pew.

NOT QUITE AS WELL AS HE MIGHT HAVE?

ummmmm... yeah, he could do better. His actual discussion of the term, while covering some portions with good merit, is also sometimes rather confused. Sometimes worse than confused.

EXAMPLES?

To give a minor example, Rob somehow ends up with the term "eonian life" meaning "the age to come".

SURELY HE MEANS "LIFE OF THE AGE TO COME"?

That, too. But in his exuberance he loses track, the result being he ends up implying that Jesus said (maybe in the original Aramaic??), "No one who has left (these things) for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come 'the age to come'."

Which makes no sense even in Hebrew, much less Greek. (Though admittedly it might count as a rabbinic pun... I guess...)

HE ACTUALLY SAYS THAT!??

No, if he had bothered to write it out with his meaning substituted in there, he would have realized he had gone a bit too far. And I don't think he was trying to cheat against his opponents here (exactly); there isn't any evidence of it. I think he just got carried away and didn't quite pay attention enough.

But I could see an opponent jumping up and down on this and trying to reduce Rob's whole discussion on the term to this ridiculousness. So I thought I should mention it.

Come to think of it, I suppose I could defend his usage even there by interpreting it as "and in the age to come {they will receive} 'the age to come' {as well as all these other things in this age}", since after all those bracketed portions are contextually implied in the statement anyway. Rob doesn't make that defense himself, and I'm doubtful from his composition that he was thinking that far ahead, but maybe I shouldn't rag on it too much, since it does work after all.

Still, his other discussions of 'eon' and its cognates in the New Testament are sometimes better. (There are two portions of that in this chapter, one briefer and earlier, one larger and later.)

One of his applied meanings later in the chapter is something I hadn't thought of myself--it's what I was referring to in the

title of this part of the review (while poking fun at myself for writing long review parts. {wry grin})

"Another meaning of *aion* is a bit more complex and nuanced, because it refers to a particular *intensity of experience that transcends time.*" (Rob's emphasis.) "We even say, 'It felt like it was taking *forever.*' Now when we use the word 'forever' in this way... what we are referring to is the intensity of feeling in that moment."

As interesting as this is, though, he never gives Biblical examples for the usage; and worse, he badly overreaches in his application of it, too.

Rob isn't satisfied to try to show how 'eonian' can be used this way (which I remind the reader he never does in Biblical reference anyway.) No, he has to put the topic into a denial that just isn't true, and which his opponents will rightly hop up and down on vigorously.

So instead of saying that eonian could mean forever in the way we're thinking but (perhaps rightly enough) could also mean 'intensity of experience' instead (an intensity that warps our perceptions of time); or (certainly rightly enough) that eonian could also mean "transcending time, belonging to another realm altogether"; Rob says *aion* (meaning *aionian*, the adjective version, since the other only means 'age') "is an altogether different word from 'forever.'"

And then he shows what he means by an altogether different word:

"Let me be clear: heaven is not forever in the way that we think of forever, as a uniform measurement of time, like days and years, marching endlessly into the future. That's not a category or concept we find in the Bible." (My emphases.)

BULL-BLEEP. PURE AND TOTAL BULL-BLEEP. (OUR EMPHASES.)

I know. When he tries to put it that way, he not only instantly sets himself up to be refuted by obvious counter-examples, he instantly contradicts himself and his own stressed affirmations elsewhere--even nearby in this chapter.

DOES HE REALLY MEAN GOD DOES NOT CONTINUE IN OUR FUTURE FOREVER!?!?

Of course he doesn't. (And he does remember that 'heaven' is sometimes a way of talking about God euphemistically in scriptures, because he himself reminds the reader of this on the next freaking page!) But his stupidly overreaching way of putting this point, if actually applied the way he insists on, ends up requiring this.

You can imagine what his less charitable opponents make out of that.

ROB BELL PREACHES A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LESSER GOD WHO DOESN'T EVEN EXIST FOREVER!!!!!!

Not true; but if they said he accidentally requires this through his method of trying to avoid having "eonian" mean endlessly hopeless punishment, that would be true enough. It gets more ridiculous, though.

MORE RIDICULOUS THAN IMPLYING THE GOD HE HIMSELF BELIEVES IN DOESN'T REALLY EXIST IF HIS INSISTED READING OF 'EONIAN' IS TRUE??!

Well, maybe not more ridiculous, but pretty close: he himself also insists very strongly (including in this chapter) that God is acting to bring about a world of perfect love and justice that will, once established in the next life (however long that takes), go on forever in just the way he denies heaven means 'forever' back here: as a matter of human and natural history.

TO SUMMARIZE, THEN, SOMETIMES WHEN JESUS USED THE WORD "HEAVEN", HE WAS SIMPLY REFERRING TO GOD, USING THE WORD AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE NAME OF GOD, BUT GOD IS NOT FOREVER IN THE WAY THAT WE THINK OF FOREVER; THAT'S NOT A CONCEPT WE FIND IN THE BIBLE.

SECOND, SOMETIMES WHEN JESUS SPOKE OF HEAVEN, HE WAS REFERRING TO THE FUTURE COMING TOGETHER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IN WHAT HE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES CALLED LIFE IN THE AGE TO COME, BUT THIS LIFE IS NOT FOREVER IN THE WAY THAT WE THINK OF FOREVER; THAT'S NOT A CONCEPT WE FIND IN THE BIBLE.

ACCORDING TO ROB BELL.

Wow, it's like you were reading what Rob himself wrote in the book!--even better than Rob was reading it! And he wrote the thing! {wry grin}

He ends up implying these points which (I want to stress) he doesn't really mean and would otherwise affirm elsewhere. But he ends up implying those self-refutations because he's trying to cheat on his opposition again. In order to avoid even the idea that hell might be 'forever' the way Rob himself thinks God and the life of the age to come (i.e. heaven) are 'forever', Rob ends up directly (though not explicitly) denying that God and the life of the age are forever.

To put it mildly, he could have handled this point a lot better. But his opponents are not likely to do that work of handling it better for him. They're likely to hysterically reject his attempt, the end, period.

SO IT'S ONLY TRASH FROM HERE OUT IN THE CHAPTER? OR IS ANYTHING ELSE GOOD LEFT?

Plenty good left!

I liked his discussion of the wealthy young ruler who comes to Christ (in the Synoptic Gospels--Rob pulls mostly from the account in GosMatt 19) asking "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Rob could have made the same point even more strongly with some more detail--the relevant phrase in Greek, in GosMark and GosLuke, is actually "what shall I do to be enjoying the allotment of the life eonian"? Which would fit Rob's observation that this rich young synagogue leader (or "chief", which is the term used in the Gospels for that position) isn't worried about what to do to go to heaven. He figures he has that covered already! (Nor, like a similar character, possibly the same character, earlier in the story as reported in GosLuke, is he asking the question for purposes of testing what Jesus will answer. He desperately wants to know.)

Rob observes that Jesus, in answering this question, leaves out asking whether the man has kept the 10th commandment, about coveting. Which turns out to be the commandment this man is breaking!--and which, when pressed on practical activity to remedy (give up his belongings), he refuses to stop breaking.

Or so Rob plausibly explains; and it's an explanation that has the merit of synching up with the Gospel authors' interpretation of what happened: "He went away very sorrowful, for he was very rich". And the followup conversation to that scene (with variants in each Gospel) tends to be about difficulty letting go of wealth, too.

I could spend more time praising this portion...

WE SENSE A "BUT".

...yeah, there's a pretty big "but" coming, I have to admit:

Rob directly and flatly avoids talking about something else Jesus also expected that man to do. And how that other expectation connects to the fact that Jesus starts with the 'second tablet' of the commandments first, instead of the 'first tablet'. Which involves following God alone without idolatry, no lesser lord or god. But which Jesus then puts on par with following Himself. Which a Jew, much moreso one religiously educated enough to already be a synagogue chief at a young age, might have had at least an immediate problem with, too.

THAT'S A BIG POINT FOR HIM TO FLATLY AVOID!!

I can fairly say I don't think Rob did so in order to deny the divinity of Jesus; he affirms that well enough in other places. Consequently, I even doubt he avoided it here in order to give

sceptical readers fewer problems in seeing a point that anyone ought to be able to grasp even if they deny (for various reasons) the uniquely special and authoritative divinity of Jesus.

But I can't help but notice that Rob does avoid even getting close to that side of the story here. And I can't help but suspect a reason why he avoids it.

BECAUSE HE THINKS IT WOULD BLOW HIS THESIS!

Maybe he thinks it would only distract from the point he's trying to make. But his main point here isn't, after all, that the rich young chief was covetous (though Rob trucks a lot of worthwhile mileage from that, too, especially in regard to entering the kingdom). His main point here, as he explicitly introduces this and other examples afterward, is that when given an opportunity to present "the gospel of salvation", Jesus tends to do something other than how evangelicals are taught to evangelize! Jesus doesn't always, or even usually, lead them through anything equivalent to the "Roman Road", and He certainly doesn't teach them the (so-called) Athanasian Creed with a warning that in order to avoid hopeless endless torment they must first and foremost affirm and hold to all those doctrines.

That's a good point to make, too; in fact I'll add it here:

6.) Jesus' idea of what a person has to do to enter 'eternal life' differs in practice pretty strongly from how evangelists are typically taught to evangelize.

That's an important thing to keep in mind; but it's also important to keep in mind that Jesus expected that rich young ruler to give up everything in order to follow Himself as the way to have eternal life.

Rob doesn't deny that following Jesus is necessarily connected to having (and enjoying!) 'eonian life'. He affirms it plenty of other places. But it's hard (for me anyway) to avoid thinking that he avoided this important detail because he didn't want to **distract** readers with how important it is to follow Jesus for having eternal life!

He has a tough row to hoe in this book already, against standard reader expectations (whether religious or irreligious). I can understand him want to avoid adding to his problems. But by trying to avoid problems here, in this way, he only gives opponents more ammunition to hang him with. (Or words to that effect. {wry grin})

Maybe his opponents ought to pay attention to where he affirms this importance elsewhere, and so not give him trouble about it here. But maybe Rob should have spent a little time mentioning

it here, too, since after all it is important: important enough for Jesus to mention.

Anyway, I kept wincing whenever I noticed him not mentioning it. For whatever that wince may be worth.

Other than that, I really liked his discussion on the rich young chief (which he comes back to again later in the chapter). I wish 890 people had thought it worthwhile to underline some of his comments in this area, all of which are quite true (instead of underlining that previous thing I complained about, where the phrase "personal relationship" is never found in the NT, which is only trivially true at best). "That's why wealth is so dangerous: if you're not careful you can easily end up with a garage full of nouns." Awesome!

But, speaking of that worthless tactic of denying that a phrase occurs in the Bible as though this denies the concept, too: when Rob says "mansion" is a word nowhere in the Bible's descriptions of heaven, that's admittedly kind of misleading--and I can imagine opponents having some serious problems here, not so much with the way it's trivially misleading, as with the way it indicates a habit of thought.

On one hand, anyone who immediately thinks of "In My Father's house are many mansions", as part of the promise of Christ to His disciples--the word there is a rare word for "abode" or "dwelling" (used only once more in the NT), and doesn't necessarily mean mansions.

On the other hand, the OT and NT both use figures for the city of God where the saints will live, which indicate the presence of rich mansions by means of surrounding description: streets are gold, everything in it is made of gems and marble, etc.

Rob is well aware of this, referencing such examples himself on occasion--including in the very same sentence he denies that the term "mansions in heaven!

BUT DOESN'T HE TREAT THE STREETS OF GOLD AS NOT BEING LITERAL? IN FACT, DIDN'T YOU SAY HE EARLIER MOCKS THE NOTION OF HEAVENLY IMAGERY BEING TAKEN LITERALLY?

Yes he does, and that brings me to the troubling point: he never bothers to mock hope in the other images he borrows about the day of the Lord to come. He treats those "earthy" images as something we can pretty literally expect to happen, and spends quite a bit of time contrasting those with our foolish naivety in taking other imagery just as seriously.

When he wants to make a point in favor of X, then he's quite conveniently selective about which Biblical imagery to take seriously, namely that which in favor of X.

In this case he has a good point to make about how we shouldn't primarily think about heaven involving the acquisition of static things rather than being primarily about the fulfillment of relationships between things and especially between people. (Though he never uses the phrase "personal relationship" of course!) But then some of the Biblical imagery becomes a problem for him; and instead of finding a creative way to make use of it, too, perhaps for purposes of making a different but equally important claim about the Day of the Lord to come (where "static" imagery might refer to something importantly "permanent" for instance, as C. S. Lewis taught several times), Rob simply punts it away in the quickest and clumsiest fashions imaginable. Literal streets of gold?--hah! Expecting that is silly! The word "mansion" never appears in Biblical descriptions of heaven!

This wouldn't be so bad, except it's a habit of thought Rob's opponents are rightly worried he'll apply in other regards. "Without a personal relationship with Christ, a person will be hopelessly lost forever." "The problem with this is that the phrase 'personal relationship' never appears in the New Testament!" So there! Q.E.D. you silly non-universalists.

SO THE REST OF THIS CHAPTER GOES BACK TO CHEATING, HM?

No, that's a passing problem, symptomatic of problems elsewhere, which might be easily overlooked in the wealth of good material surrounding it.

But even his good points get garbled a bit when it looks like he might have to grant parity of principle to his opponents.

So for example, Rob spends some time making strong points about how our attitude and what we do with our lives here and now, makes a difference in how we will be living in the new world to come.

BUT ALL CHRISTIANS TEACH THAT!

Right; so then the point becomes problematic when he wants to show he's doing something different. Consequently, he asks afterward when trying to contrast himself to those false teachers over there who think "we're going somewhere else": "if you believe that you're going to leave and evacuate to *somewhere else*, then why do anything about this world?"

BUT CHRISTIAN TEACHERS DON'T TEACH WE'RE GOING SOMEWHERE ELSE, UNLESS THEY'RE POORLY EDUCATED GNAT-WITS WHO DON'T NOTICE THAT THE IMAGERY OF THIS WORLD BEING DESTROYED IS BALANCED AND EXCEEDED BY PROMISES OF THIS WORLD BEING REMADE!

I know.

AND EVEN IF THEY'RE POORLY EDUCATED GNAT-WITS, OR EVEN IF IT WAS IN FACT TRUE THAT WE'RE GOING SOMEWHERE ELSE, *ROB ALREADY EXPLAINED WHY PEOPLE GOING SOMEWHERE ELSE COULD AND SHOULD STILL BE MORALLY EXPECTED TO DO JUSTICE HERE AND NOW!*

I know. Not only because it's right to do what is morally right anyway wherever we are, but because it makes a difference now in the kind of persons we'll be later, whether or not we're "somewhere else".

But since his opponents can and do easily agree with him on this, he can't just acknowledge that this would be true even if we're going somewhere else (although we're not) and even if his opponents taught we're going somewhere else (which by and large they don't). So he insinuates by a question that because they believe heaven will be somewhere else other than a transformed earth (which they may or may not believe) then it makes no difference whether we do justice here and now (which they definitely do not believe!)

SO IT'S ALL CHEATING FROM HERE TO THE END OF THE CHAPTER THEN?

No, no. There are lots of good things still in this chapter, too.

BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE BELL IS PREACHING ONLY A LOVEY-DOVEY HEAVEN WHERE IT DOESN'T MATTER--

Okay, now you're the one conveniently ignoring what Rob is saying (even only in my review report): Rob repeatedly affirms it does matter in this life for purposes of heaven in the next life.

NOT IF EVERYONE GOES INTO HEAVEN REGARDLESS!

But he isn't saying "regardless"; not only will he be talking about hell soon, and not only hell in this life, but he even warns here in the heaven chapter that heaven brings judgment against sin.

"Heaven comforts, but... heaven also confronts. Heaven, we learn, has teeth, flames, edges, and sharp points. [...] Jesus brings the man hope, but that hope bears within it judgment. [...] Jesus makes no promise," unlike some of Rob's opponents by the way (though others of them agree with him on this), "that in the blink of an eye we will suddenly become totally different people who have vastly different tastes, attitudes and perspectives. Paul makes it very clear that we will have our true selves revealed and that once the sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies are prohibited and removed, for some there simply won't be much left. 'As one escaping through the flames,' is how he put it."

SOUNDS LIKE ROB IS PREACHING THAT THE ONLY OPTIONS ARE FORCED SALVATION OR ANNIHILATION!

No, he'll be qualifying those observations later in favor of free will, too: those who insist on clinging to the cross mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3 will be persistently burned by that same fire mentioned in 1 Cor 3. But it is the same fire either way, and many (though not all) of Rob's opponents want to deny this.

I wish 890 people had thought to underline things in this chapter such as: "Jesus calls disciples in order to teach us how to be and what to be; his intention is for us to be growing progressively in generosity, forgiveness, honesty, courage, truth telling, and responsibility, so that as these take over our lives we are taking part more and more and more in life in the age to come, now."

There are loads of great things in this chapter: the faith of the thief on the cross, which is so much less than what Christian teachers often insist upon for salvation, but which Jesus accepts and immediately rewards. "According to Jesus, then, heaven is as far away as that day when heaven and earth become one again, and as close as a few hours." The comparison between the poor abandoned mother of great character in the eyes of God, faithful with what little she has been given; and the beautiful, rich, famous, talented people endlessly embroiled in scandal and controversy who waste their talents and their money. The sheep in the judgment who are surprised to find out they've been serving Jesus all along, compared to those who are sure they'll get in but are turned away by Jesus--

WAIT: BELL ACKNOWLEDGES PEOPLE WILL BE TURNED AWAY BY JESUS!!?

Surprisingly often, for people who aren't expecting him to do so at all! (Though personally I wish he had mentioned the goats of the same judgment parable fit that bill as well. But anyone going to look to see if the sheep really don't expect Jesus to be judging, much less accepting them, will see the goats easily enough.)

THEN WHY IS HE A UNIVERSALIST!? OR NOT A UNIVERSALIST BUT A UNIVERSALIST!? OR WHATEVER YOU SAID HE WAS?!

Because (to put it succinctly) he never treats that turning away as finally hopeless. More on that later.

But until then, Rob goes pretty far agreeing with his opponents (though he never puts it that way). I wish 890 people had thought to underline these things, too:

"It's important to remember this the next time we hear people say they can't believe in a 'God of judgment.'

"Yes, they can.

"Often, we can think of little else... every time we stumble upon one more instance of the human heart gone wrong, we shake our fist and cry out, 'Will somebody please do something about this?'

"[...] Same with the word 'anger.' When we hear people saying they can't believe in a God who gets angry--yes, they can. How should God react to a child being forced into prostitution? How should God feel about a country starving while warlords hoard the food supply? What kind of God wouldn't get angry at a financial scheme that robs thousands of people of their life savings?

"And that is the promise of the prophets in the age to come: God acts. Decisively. On behalf of everybody who's ever been stepped on by the machine, exploited, abused, forgotten, or mistreated. God puts an end to it. God says, 'Enough.'"

AND YET ROB DOESN'T THINK GOD WIPES THOSE PERSONS OUT OF EXISTENCE OR THROWS THEIR WORTHLESS ASSES INTO HOPELESS ONGOING PUNISHMENT?!?

Rob keeps in mind that our asses are in the same sling, regardless of how 'little' we think our own contributions to that injustice are (which are likely to be more frequent than we would prefer to acknowledge!)

The judgment coming is the same whoever we are. But 'our' asses are no more worthy than 'theirs', and 'theirs' are no more worthless than 'ours' in the eyes of God: "In the midst of the prophets' announcements about God's judgment we also find promises about mercy and grace. Isaiah quotes God, saying, 'Come... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (chap. 1).

"Justice and mercy hold hands, they kiss, they belong together in the age to come, an age that is complex, earthy, participatory, and free from all death, destruction, and despair."

FOREVER!!!

Heh! Yeah he means forever here, not not-forever (or whatever) back when he doesn't want forever to mean forever when talking about hell.

Having complained about his cheating overreach there, though, I will add that I'm actually glad to see many more people underlining these next two portions than who underlined that cheating overreach I complained about earlier (where the phrase "personal relationship" never appears in the Bible.)

"To say it again, eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection to God." (1042 highlighters there.)

"Eternal life doesn't start when we die; it starts now. It's not about a life that begins at death; it's about experiencing the kind of life now that can endure and survive even death." (985 highlighters.)

There, by the way, is one of his few obscure references to something I thought he should have brought out far more strongly: those who have eonian life now still die; and still are transformed after death. Thanks to the One Who Himself is the Resurrection and the Life!

I like how Rob puts it near this (and toward the end of this chapter). Even though we may have eonian life now, in this life, it's still like trying to play a piano with oven mitts. Or trying to embrace our lover with a hazmat suit. (I thought that one was especially appropriate!) Or like trying to have a detailed conversation about complex emotions, but we're underwater. Or like trying to taste the 32 different spices in curry, but our mouth is filled with gravel.

I love how he ends the chapter this way:

"There's heaven now, somewhere else.
"There's heaven here, sometime else.
"And then there's Jesus's invitation to heaven
"here
"and
"now,
"in this moment,
"in this place.

"Try and paint *that*."

I love a lot of things about this chapter.

The only thing, at bottom, I don't love...

...is when Rob refuses to see...

...that someone did

paint that.

Part 6: Fishy For Hell

By the way, this chapter is (unlike my review) the only chapter in the book without a clever/colorful/descriptive/multi-word title. (Rob calls it only "Hell".) I suspect this is because--

OH, SO THIS IS WHERE HE'S GOING TO DENY HELL EXISTS, IS IT?
AND/OR REFUSES TO TAKE HELL SERIOUSLY!?

--he takes hell very seriously.

HA, WE--! UH... WAIT. WE HAVE TROUBLE BELIEVING THAT. HOW CAN HE TAKE HELL SERIOUSLY IF HE DOESN'T ACCEPT IT BEING MAXIMALLY FINAL?!

How can anyone take Satan seriously unless he's on equal par with God? Which was the point of the Manichees and other God/Anti-God cosmological dualists. (Or rather the neo-Manichees; the original Manichees insisted that the devil was only created and wouldn't be triumphant against God!) Also, it was the point of Satan in his rebellion and in his temptation of humanity: to be like the Most High!

But he isn't, and he won't be. Yet trinitarian Christians (and almost all non-trinitarian Christians for that matter) still take Satan seriously. Just not as seriously as we take God.

Put very briefly, that's Rob's point. It's a point he shares with almost all Christians, including with other trinitarian Christians. He just doesn't share how they go about taking-evil-seriously-but-not-as-seriously-as-God.

Put very briefly again, Rob agrees with them that where sin exceeds grace super-exceeds for not as the sin is the grace. He disagrees with them by not turning around later and claiming (in effect) that where grace exceeds sin super-exceeds for not as the grace is the sin.

Fortunately, he talks about this sort of thing later (though not quite the same way I just did).

Unfortunately, he decides to talk about first, and I quote, "every single verse in the Bible in which we find the actual word hell."

WOW--IN A POPULAR NON-TECHNICAL BOOK HE'S GOING TO TALK ABOUT EVERY VERSE IN THE BIBLE THAT TALKS ABOUT HELL?!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! No.

WOW--IN A POPULAR NON-TECHNICAL BOOK HE'S GOING TO MAKE A CHEAP RHETORICAL POINT ABOUT THE WORD 'HELL' NEVER APPEARING IN THE BIBLE?!

Your second guess is better.

I understand why he thought he had to try this topic since, y'know', "The Bible" and all. But since the word "hell" is often used to translate "sheol" (for example), then if he was really going to (and I quote again) "show you every single verse in the Bible in which we find the actual word 'hell'", he should have shown us, as he specifically said, every single verse in the Bible in which we find the word actually translated as 'hell'.

BUT SHEOL/PIT ISN'T ALWAYS TRANSLATED AS HELL!

As if that keeps him from referencing a few verses where sheol/pit is rarely if ever translated as hell... {snorf}

Since he himself includes references to such verses, though, then either he has to show us all such verses, or else he fails his promise to, and I quote again, "show you every single verse in the Bible" on the topic. Meaning his promise was only a shallow rhetorical trick.

UNLESS HE ACTUALLY DOES REFER TO ALL 63 VERSES FROM THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION REFERRING TO SHEOL/PIT/GRAVE, PLUS ALL THE OTHER TERMS AND THEIR EQUIVALENTS...?

Which he does not.

Rob has some reasonably good points to make here. But they're likely to be obscured, for people who know more about the Bible than he's expecting or for people who read commentaries from opponents who know more about the Bible than Rob's target readers.

He couldn't be satisfied with some examples for his good points; probably because even Rob knows there's more to the case from the non-universalist side than that. So he has to try to convince his reader that he's shutting down their side of the case completely. Look!--right there!--it's every single verse! He just showed them to you, didn't he!? And hell, "hell" isn't even a real word in Hebrew or Greek! **Flawless--Victory!!!**

Nonononono, don't look up the contexts, or find a computer program online or something, he just showed you all the verses! He said so! Trust him: he knows what he's talking about!

When Rob's opponents nuke him from orbit for trying to hide his non-scholarly approach from critique behind his popular audience while he himself makes claims he expects his audience to take seriously as though he was a scholar, and even outright and intentionally misleads his audience: things like this are why.

BUT THERE WERE GOOD POINTS HERE, TOO?

Sadly mired in his cheating. But yes. He could have even made the points a little better than he does!

"First, we consistently find affirmations of the power of God over all of life and death, [and] of God's presence and involvement in whatever it is that happens after a person dies, although it's fairly ambiguous at best as to just exactly what it looks like."

WAIT--DIDN'T ROB IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER LEAN HARD ON THE UNAMBIGUITY OF ALL THE EARTHY CREATIVE THINGS HAPPENING AFTER DEATH, BACK WHEN HE WANTED TO MAKE A POSITIVE POINT IN FAVOR OF HIS OWN IDEA?

Yes; and I have to say it does look like he's appealing to obscurity here for purposes of avoiding having to recognize anything like, for example, the final verses of Isaiah. Not that those couldn't be discussed and dealt with, but that would take time and effort and might lose his non-technical audience. It's simpler and easier to just cheat in his own favor here... I mean, uh, broadly summarize. {wry grin}

MAYBE HE'S DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN WHAT HAPPENS IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEATH, AND WHAT HAPPENS IN THE DAY OF THE LORD TO COME, AFTER THE RESURRECTION?

I wish I could think he was making that distinction. But when he writes, in regard to this same first point, that "very little is given in the way of actual details regarding individual destinies", then the scope looks broader than any such distinction.

Still, he has a worthwhile point here. There's even a hidden extension that (surprisingly) he doesn't mention: the Biblical statements about God being the God of both life and death, living and dying, tend to involve God killing people (sending them into sheol, however one wants to translate that), and raising them up again, in that order, and in regard to the same people--as the contexts of those verses tend to indicate! (Not that Rob talks about contexts here.)

"Second [...] what we find in the scriptures is a more nuanced understanding that sees life and death as two ways of being alive."

WHICH IS HARDLY A POINT DISPUTED BY NON-UNIVERSALISTS WHO AFFIRM ETERNAL CONSCIOUS TORMENT!

True, but annihilationists tend to miss this point; and I like how Rob (via an example from Moses in Deuteronomy) extends the practical application to here and now, as well as in regard to what happens after our bodies die. "The one kind of life is in vital connection with the living God, in which they experience more and more peace and wholeness. The other kind of life is

less and less connected with God and contains more and more despair and destruction."

On the other hand, since Rob mentions Moses in Deut 30, that same speech (and related ones) show that Moses (or at least God through inspiration) was apparently "terribly concerned with" "the precise details of who goes where, when, how, with what, and for how long", despite Rob's denial otherwise that the Hebrews weren't terribly concerned with this.

BUT ROB IS CONCERNED WITH WHO GOES WHERE, WHEN, HOW, WITH WHAT, AND FOR HOW LONG, AS WELL AS BEING "INTERESTED IN THE ETHICS OF AND WAYS OF LIVING *THIS* LIFE", QUOTE UNQUOTE, OR HE WOULDN'T HAVE WRITTEN THIS BOOK! AND GIVEN THE BOOK ITS SUBTITLE!!!

Yes, somehow in his mind he thinks that the Hebrews were far more interested in one than the other, as though interest in one excludes the other, despite trying to tell us earlier that they were interested in both. But hey, that was back in the chapter on heaven!--if he acknowledged his own point again here in the chapter on hell, that might be problematic. {wry grin}

And the final prophetic warnings of Moses (from which Rob himself quotes on occasion, including in this chapter) are a fine example of this! God warns that if His people insist on doing injustice in this life, He is going to utterly destroy them, not only in this life (as in scattering them around among the nations) but down into death itself (so that they are neither slave nor free). But then, after this, His people will as a result of this ultimate punishment finally repent and return to faithfulness, and when this happens (which has to be after their deaths sometime) God will restore them. Moreover, even though the nations will also be zorched for picking on Israel, the nations will also rejoice in the salvation of God.

I would say that all counts as being very concerned about some important details of who goes where, when, how, with what, and for how long!

...WAIT... THAT SOUNDS VERY MUCH LIKE PURGATORIAL UNIVERSALISM!

Aye, verily.

ROB JUST SAILS PAST ALL THAT, IN ORDER TO MAKE SOME CHEAP INACCURATE POINTS?

Aye, verily.

OKAY, WAIT, HOLD UP, IF ALL THAT WAS TRUE, DESPITE THE EXTREME LANGUAGE OF WRATH AND PUNISHMENT IN THOSE FINAL CHAPTERS OF DEUTERONOMY, WOULDN'T THAT JUST INSPIRE PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY GOD'S PEOPLE, TO FEEL LIKE THEY COULD SIN WITH IMPUNITY BECAUSE THEY WERE GOING TO BE EVENTUALLY SAVED BY GOD ANYWAY!?!?

Someone would, in my opinion, have to be a raving willful ignoramus to try to take advantage of that promise while ignoring the threats of wrath preceding the hope of that promise.

But as it happens, God even anticipates that abuse: "And it shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered with the dry!'" Why would this person have peace hearing the words of this curse? Because he's only focusing on the eventual salvation, not taking equally seriously the warnings of punishment and wrath. Such a person doesn't care about beings saved from his sins, only from any bad results following from his sins, hoping he can continue them!

"YHWH will never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of YHWH and His jealousy will smoke against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will lie down with him, and YHWH will blot out his name from under heaven. Then YHWH will single him out for evil from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law." (Deut 29:19-21)

SO THAT PERSON SHALL NEVER HAVE FORGIVENESS! IT SAYS SO RIGHT THERE!

So long as he thus refuses to repent, true. But that doesn't void the subsequent prophecy of God that once this curse has come upon them, even to the point where they are neither slave nor free (and thus no longer living on the earth!), they will finally repent and God will vindicate His people, restoring them to blessing. Just as it is God Who puts to death, so it is God Who brings to life. Deut 32 is the culmination of this line of thought in that scroll. Most of the chapter is warning about the butt-kicking to come, of both Israel and the Gentiles, but the sure and certain hope at the end shouldn't be disregarded.

And that's something I think we all as Christians (or even as only Jews!) should be concerned with.

Rob is concerned with that, too; just not here, where it might look shallowly problematic to his shallow reading audience. So he treats the matter shallowly. That way he doesn't have to be fair to his opposition! {big grin}

WHAT ABOUT NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES?

Oh, he treats them just as shallowly, too, don't worry. Starting with numbering how often "the actual word 'hell'" is used in the NT.

WELL, OBVIOUSLY NONE, BECAUSE THAT WORD AS SUCH DOESN'T EXIST IN THE NT, ANY MORE THAN THAT WORD AS SUCH EXISTS IN THE--

Twelve times.

--... WHAT?

Roughly. Quote, unquote.

SO... WAIT... SO WHEN TALKING ABOUT HOW OFTEN THE ACTUAL WORD "HELL" IS USED IN THE OT, HE MAKES A BIG POINT OF HOW THE TERM NEVER SHOWS UP... WAIT, HE SAID... CRAP, OUR HEADS ARE SPINNING...

He said he was going to point out every time the actual word 'hell' is used in the Bible, and then for the OT he pointed out less than half the times a word often translated 'hell' is used. While ignoring cases when the concept might be referred to without using a term at all.

BUT NOW...

Now words that don't read 'hell' but are commonly translated as 'hell' show up twelve times, instead of umpty-muffledish times in the OT, mumble mumble. Roughly.

WHAT THE HELL???

Excuse me, not 'words'. My bad. He only counts when the word "Gehenna" is translated as "hell". Not when "hades" is translated that way.

HE DOESN'T REALIZE 'HADES' IS OFTEN TRANSLATED AS HELL!?

Weirdly, no he doesn't--or anyway he doesn't acknowledge it. Yet he does acknowledge that "hades" and "tartarus", and I quote, "occasionally mean something similar to hell". But he doesn't want to count them, too, because that would make his count look higher. Even higher. I dunno, maybe the New Revised Standard Version which he seems to imagine is the only Bible translation anyone has ever read in English (not to say other languages), always renders those terms as 'hades' and 'Tartarus'...? (Anyone want to check me on that?)

THIS MAKES US GNASH OUR TEETH AS THOUGH WE ARE ANIMALS CHEWING ON GARBAGE INSTEAD OF IN FRUSTRATED RAGE!

Indeed. {wry grin} His notion of what the "teeth-gnashing" means is imaginative but not contextually appropriate.

It gets worse, because Rob is clearly trying to 'minimize' what the implications of Gehenna are here, by reducing it to the town garbage dump. "So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, 'Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere...'" But reducing it to that meaning leaves him with an unfortunate implication of people being sent

as garbage to the garbage dump to be burned and eaten up! How this is not supposed to be equivalent to either annihilation or endless constant torment, is left to Rob's imagination, as he gives no help to the reader on this point.

SO DOES HE AT LEAST MENTION ALL OF THE "ROUGHLY TWELVE" PLACES THE WORD OCCURS?

Yes; if by "roughly" you mean "eight". {wry grin} "And that's it. Those are all the mentions of 'hell' in the Bible!" Wow, Rob, that was 25% fewer than you were estimating after all! Um, yay then?

(This also highlights that he is not including "hades" and the one use of "tartarus" in his count, as he then goes on to mention them after this announcement. If the reader is expecting him to mention all the uses of "hades", the reader will have to get used to disappointment.)

HOW OFTEN IS THE LORD'S SUPPER MENTION IN THE BIBLE, BY THE WAY? FOUR TIMES?

Maybe seven, depending on how the references are identified. This doesn't stop people from taking it very seriously, despite the lack of details; but as it happens we have a lot more data about post-mortem punishment in the Bible than we do about the Lord's Supper.

SO BELL DOESN'T TAKE THE REFERENCES TO HELL SERIOUSLY?

He does--eventually. But a somewhat educated reader could be forgiven for thinking that he's trying not to take it seriously by how he approaches the topic in his introduction for this chapter. Heck, even a non-educated reader might get that impression, seeing as how Rob ends the introduction "having a hard time believing that somewhere down below the earth's crust is a really crafty figure in red tights holding a three-pointed spear, playing Pink Floyd records backward, and enjoying the hidden messages." Oh you silly "primitive, mythic religion" people who "use fear and punishment to control people for all sorts of devious reasons"!--"we've evolved beyond all of that outdated belief, right?"

WAH-HUH?!? DID YOU SKIP A TOPIC?!

Nope, Rob goes straight from outright cheating in order to convince uneducated readers the Bible says less about hell than they've been told, to lighting a ridiculous straw-man version of Satan on fire. So to speak.

Now, to be fair, the imagery used of Satan (and other devils) in the Bible is sometimes weird and even scientifically untrue. But no one anywhere at anytime would be frightened to think the goofy devil Rob describes existed. Whereas no one with even the

slightest ability to read a text in understanding would think the Satan and other rebel angels in the Bible are anything other than threatening, regardless of whether the reader thought the details were true. The scriptures do make fun of the Devil every once in a while, but even then they make fun by being more threatening the other way around.

(I have in mind Jesus' witty wordplay regarding the "plunder-possessor" being "plundered" in his own house, in one scene common to multiple Gospels. Also God's taming of Leviathan at the climax of the OT book of Job; the humorous imagery depends on the Great Rebel Dragon having been set up first as a threat worth taking very seriously by mere humans at least.)

More to the point, while the Bible may (on rare occasions) joke about a threatening devil at the devil's expense, the imagery used of sheol/hades/Gehenna/Tartarus etc. is never amusing. It's so extremely non-amusing that even Rob Bell, trying to help his readers disrespect it, apparently had trouble coming up with harmlessly silly imagery concerning it. But he could come up with harmless imagery of the Devil--harmless imagery mostly promoted as such by times and cultures who had stopped believing in the devil being any threat at all.

On the other hand: it's also possible that Rob isn't mocking the notion of hell and the devil here, as mocking the notion that we have "evolved past" that kind of thing.

Because despite this actively misleading introduction, Rob is going to talk pretty strongly about hell once his chapter gets going--including as a post-mortem reality (even if he doesn't mainly focus there.)

WAIT, YOU MEAN THIS CHAPTER HAS SOME VALUE AFTER ALL?

Certainly. Rob has seen "what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and kind and humble."

The result is hell--a hell with utterly non-silly fiends. (Fiends more like the ones mentioned in the Bible, although he doesn't bother to mention this himself.)

BUT THAT'S ONLY IN THIS LIFE!

Rob does mainly focus there, because first it is also important to recognize and oppose the hell we make for other people (and for ourselves) in this life. But also because people can indisputably see it in this life. He doesn't deny that this can and will carry over into the life to come post-mortem; he affirms that, too.

"It is absolutely vital that we acknowledge that love, grace, and humanity can be rejected... We are terrifyingly free to do as we please. God gives us what we want, and if that's hell, we

can have it. We have that kind of freedom, that kind of choice. We are that free. We can use machetes if we want to."

"Some words are strong for a reason. We need those words to be that intense, loaded, complex, and offensive, because they need to reflect the realities they describe. And that's what we find in Jesus's teaching about hell--a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity."

UHHHH... YES, AND THE HARSH LANGUAGE OF THOSE CONSEQUENCES ARE DIRECTED AGAINST THE SINNERS! WHEREAS BELL SOUNDS LIKE HE'S DESCRIBING THE CONSEQUENCES AS RESULTS TO THE VICTIMS OF SINNERS!

Yeaaahhhh, the reader could be forgiven for thinking (if they aren't actually familiar with the material) that Rob is treating that imagery that way. Because he totally does. "Some agony needs agonizing language. Some destruction does make you think of fire. Some betrayal actually feels like you've been burned. Some injustices do cause things to heat up."

However, it must also be said in Rob's favor, that he goes on to talk about specific example (or one famous specific example anyway) where, of course, in the post-mortem life to come the suffering is coming to those who acted unjustly. The victims of sinners experience hell on earth now; the sinners experience hell after death. They're free to have hell if they insist on it, but Rob is very insistent (though not quite in these words) that they are not free to escape impenitently from the consequences of their sins.

SO BELL AFFIRMS THAT GOD PUNISHES SINNERS IN THE NEXT LIFE?

... ..wellllllllllllllllllllll...

THAT SOUNDS LIKE "NNNNNNNOOOOOOOOO".

Like quite a few Arminians (including my own teacher C. S. Lewis), Rob very much downplays the notion that God punishes anyone after death. Sinners punish themselves, in effect, by being who they insist on being. Rob is insistent that God authoritatively allows it, but he avoids saying God inflicts it.

EXCEPT MOST OF THOSE THINGS HE ADMITS JESUS SAYS, INVOLVE GOD AUTHORITATIVELY INFLICTING IT!! OR MORE PRECISELY, JESUS HIMSELF DOING SO!!

I know. I'm not saying it makes any exegetical sense for him to try to get around it. It doesn't make any metaphysical sense either, especially when Rob himself acknowledges it happens thanks to God's authority. That still means God is punishing them!

Fortunately for Rob, the main example he pulls is the famous parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the topic of Who is doing the punishing never comes up.

UNFORTUNATELY FOR BELL, THAT PARABLE ALSO HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SALVATION FROM HELL! IF ANYTHING IT SEEMS TO TEACH THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SALVATION!!

Fortunately for him (and for his readers), Rob does a pretty good job discussing--

DOES HE BOTHER TO MENTION THE RICH MAN IS IN HELL AS A PUNISHMENT BY GOD?

No.

WE THOUGHT HE WOULDN'T. DOES HE TRY TO PRETEND THIS IS ONLY HAPPENING BEFORE DEATH OR IS ONLY A METAPHOR THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH WARNING ABOUT RESULTS AFTER DEATH?

Nope!

HAH!--WE THOUGHT HE...! WAIT... WHAT?!

I said nope. He only treats the imagery metaphorically--

HAH!--YOU ADMIT HE ONLY TREATS THE IMAGERY METAPHORICALLY!

--in the sense that most non-universalists nowadays don't teach that there is a physical gap that can't be jumped yet can be easily seen and spoken across (with Abraham happening to be conveniently consoling Lazarus on the other side from where the Rich Man conveniently happens to be burning.)

That doesn't mean they treat the parable as only being metaphorical. And Rob doesn't either.

BUT BELL DOES TRY TO PRETEND THIS ISN'T ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH, RIGHT??!

Nope. Not only does he stress that this is a warning about after death as well as this life, he repeatedly stresses it. And Kindle readers have even underlined it. A lot of them.

The Rich Man (per Rob's analysis) is still rejecting God by refusing to care for Lazarus and, even worse, by still insisting on treating Lazarus as a servant at best.

The Rich Man has died, but he hasn't died the kind of death that brings life, the kind of death the gospel of God calls us to die. "He's alive in death, but in profound torment, because he's living [after death] with the realities of not properly dying the kind of death that actually leads a person into the only

kind of life that's worth living." (870 people had underlined that when I downloaded the book.) "There are individual hells, and communal, society-wide hells, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously. There is hell now, and there is hell later, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously." (909 highlighters for that one.)

Rob stresses that just as "there are all kinds of ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in this life" we can also resist and reject it in the next life, after our physical deaths, in the age of the Day of the Lord to come. (And between now and then in hades, too!)

... UH... WOW... THAT... THAT WAS AMAZINGLY CONVENTIONAL...

Anyone who tells you Rob rejects hell after death, is either incompetent, or is lying. He absolutely affirms it.

He doesn't affirm that hell after death is hopeless (including here--although neither does he talk here about the possibility remaining for God to save the Rich Man from sin. Hints at it, but doesn't specifically say so.)

SO... THIS PART OF THE CHAPTER IS AWESOME THEN??

Considerably more so than his intro to this chapter. All things considered.

... WHEW! GOOD!--WE'RE RELIEVED TO HEAR YOU SUGGEST HE DOES SOMETHING FOOLISH AGAIN HERE!

Sadly, yes; and as usual his foolishness undermines a good point he's in the midst of trying to make.

"Some people are primarily concerned with systemic evils--corporations, nations, and institutions that enslave people, exploit the earth, and disregard the welfare of the weak and disempowered. Others are primarily concerned with individual sins, and so they focus on personal morality, individual patterns, habits and addictions that prevent human flourishing and cause profound suffering.

"Some pass out pamphlets that explain how to have peace with God; some work in refugee camps in war zones. Some have radio shows that discuss particular interpretations of particular Bible verses; others work to liberate women and children from the sex trade."

SO FAR SO GOOD... UM, RIGHT?

Sure; after all Rob emphasizes a concern for both personal and corporate morality and justice. Not all of us can be a foot or a hand or an eye, and no part of the body should look down on the other because all are needful, but rather each should be

supporting the other. Without teaching and addressing individual concerns, the larger corporate concerns (which are comprised of individuals!) will have nothing to work with; but unless individuals put morality and understanding into practice, there is no hope of reforming the corporate behaviors of humanity.

...AND THIS IS A PROBLEM???

No. But then Rob goes on to write, in parallel with those other paragraphs:

"Often the people most concerned about others going to hell when they die seem less concerned with the hells on earth right now, while the people most concerned with the hells on earth right now seem the least concerned about hell after death." (Currently underlined by a whopping 1217 Kindlers, by the way.)

WHAT?!? THAT'S SILLY! WHO DOES ROB THINK SET UP AND SUPPORT THOSE ENDEAVORS TRYING TO DEAL WITH THE HELLS ON EARTH RIGHT NOW!?!

The people who pass out pamphlets and have radio shows discussing particular interpretations of particular Bible verses, and who are concerned primarily with individual sins and so who focus on personal morality of course. Oh, wait--no he probably thinks they have nothing to do with infrastructural mission work (feeding the poor, bringing medicine, fighting against abuse, rescuing women and children, etc.)

I wish I could think he was comparing everyone in the first two paragraphs against people who aren't concerned with hells on earth right now. But based on some (even more ridiculous) things he says in a later chapter, I gather this was his intention here instead.

WE HOPE YOU'LL TALK ABOUT THOSE EVEN MORE RIDICULOUS THINGS NEXT!

No, later. First I want to compliment Rob on doing what he does next.

WHICH IS...?

Pointing out that most of what Jesus has to say about hell, whether its terms are mentioned or not, is aimed at people who thought they were in good safe religious standing with God already. "Jesus did not use hell to try and compel 'heathens' and 'pagans' to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love."

BELL DOESN'T ACTUALLY LIST "EVERY SINGLE ONE" OF THOSE INSTANCES, WE BET.

Ha ha! No. Not even close. Although to be fair he doesn't pretend he's going to do so here. Also, not listing all such instances doesn't harm half his point.

HALF...?

The half having to do with warning God's chosen people not to stray from their calling and identity to show the world God's love.

THE OTHER HALF BEING...?

While it's true (and I think important) that Jesus doesn't usually warn pagans and heathens about wrath coming from God when they die--

WAIT, ISN'T THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT STILL IN THE BIBLE?

Aye, verily.

AND WASN'T THAT DELIVERED TO PEOPLE WHO HAD COME AS FAR AS FROM THE NORTHERN REGIONS UP NEAR TYRE AND SIDON, AN AREA CRAWLING WITH PAGANISM?

Aye, verily.

AND DOESN'T THAT HAVE SEVERAL WARNINGS ABOUT WRATH TO COME FOR PEOPLE WHO INSIST ON BEING UNJUST, NOT TO SAY UNFAITHFUL TO GOD?

Aye, verily.

INCLUDING WARNINGS ABOUT BEING BURNED IN GEHENNA!?

Aye, verily.

AND ROB BELL JUST IGNORES OR SAILS PAST SUCH THINGS, HUH!

Aye, verily.

AND AREN'T SIGNIFICANT PORTIONS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY AIMED AT WARNING THE PAGAN NATIONS THAT ZORCHING IS ON THE WAY TO THEM FROM GOD?

Aye, verily.

AND DOESN'T ROB AFFIRM THAT JESUS AT LEAST SPEAKS FOR GOD, OR IS EVEN THE VERY ACTION OF GOD INCARNATE?

Aye, verily.

SO HE'S JUST IGNORING THINGS THAT MIGHT BE INCONVENIENT BECAUSE THEY WOULD BLOW HIS THESIS!!

Keeping in mind that Rob's own warnings about hell coming after death, not only in this life, to those who insist on making life a hell (even a little), are not themselves restricted in principle to nominal religious Christians--aye, verily.

However: sauce for his goose is sauce for some ganders, too. Because Rob Bell is far from the only Christian preacher and teacher who overlooks inconvenient contexts in order to stress what he believes to be true.

For example, regarding the final fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

NOW WAIT A MINUTE!--JUST BECAUSE JESUS SAYS IT'LL BE MORE BEARABLE FOR THOSE HELLISH PERVERTED MINIONS IN THE RESURRECTION THAN FOR SUPPOSEDLY RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE--

A warning people who think of themselves as righteous ought to keep in mind, of course (ahem)...

--DOESN'T MEAN THERE'S HOPE FOR S&G AFTER DEATH IN THE DAY OF THE LORD TO COME! IT ONLY MEANS OTHER PEOPLE WON'T SUFFER AS MUCH HOPELESS PUNISHMENT THEN AS THEY WILL! IT'S A HYPERBOLIC EXAMPLE OF HOW-MUCH-MORESO!

Like the Queen of Sheba.

RIGHT! LIKE THE... WHO?

The pagan queen who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon and who will rise up to curse the immorality of those who reject the Wisdom that is greater than Solomon.

YEAH, BUT JESUS DOESN'T SAY SODOM AND GOMORRAH WILL BE IN THAT POSITION OF MORAL SUPERIORITY!

No, but she's mentioned in parallel with them in the same warning.

EVEN SO, THAT ISN'T LIKE SAYING THAT GOD IS GOING TO RESTORE SODOM AND ITS PEOPLE TO FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM!

Actually, Jesus was no doubt referencing what we call Ezekiel chapter 16, especially verses 44-63. Where after comparing the sins of Israel as exceeding those of Sodom and Samaria, making them look righteous by comparison, and promising equal destruction on rebel Israel, God reveals that He will restore Sodom and its people to fellowship with Him as part of His promise to restore Israel and her people to fellowship to Him, reconciling them with each other in the process. As the proverb says, "Like mother like daughter"; as the mother sinned so did the daughter; as the mother was condemned, so was the daughter; as the daughter will eventually be saved after condemnation, so will the mother.

So, yeah, Jesus may not say it straight out, but He's referencing the salvation of pagan enemies of God after death as well as their condemnation (among whom He includes rebel Israel). {smile}

NO NO NO, THAT CAN'T BE TRUE... THERE CAN'T BE HOPE FOR THEM...

There is; and Rob rightly mentions it (though he doesn't go into detail of course).

NO, GOD HAS TO BE TALKING ABOUT RIGHTEOUS SURVIVORS, OR A FEW SURVIVORS HE GRACIOUSLY SPARES FROM DESTRUCTION, COMFORTING EACH OTHER AFTERWARD, AS IN EZEKIEL 14, NOT TOO LONG PREVIOUSLY!

God talks about that, too, prophetically (as in Ezekiel 14, not too long previously). And no doubt the imagery being referenced here is that survivors of Israel's overthrow by Babylon will be brought back to Palestine along with survivors of Samaria and Sodom's overthrow, where they will live and work together in peace, as daughters of Israel, under God.

...UH, RIGHT!

Which has happened already?

... ..UH SURE!

Good try, but no. Israel was brought back out of Babylon, but not reconciled with the surviving people of Sodom and Samaria also brought back out of Babylon. Not least because they weren't sent back out of Babylon! (Also, the Israelites got in trouble with intermarrying with pagans from Samaria and the area to the south where Sodom used to be, when they returned from Babylon.)

So no, this was only partially fulfilled by the historical return of survivors. But partial prophecies like this, if they are still prophecies at all, point (like the firstfruits!) as a promise for the full completion of the prophecy later. Long after everyone involved in the historical fulfillment has died, not incidentally.

OKAY, BUT THAT ONLY MEANS SURVIVORS OF THE TRIUMPHANT DESTRUCTION OF JESUS' SECOND COMING WILL COMFORT ONE ANOTHER AS LOYAL FOLLOWERS OF GOD AFTERWARD!!

While that might make sense in regard to Ezekiel 14, which distinguishes between survivors going to the audience from the ruin to comfort one another, Ezekiel 16 is directed to all the sinners corporately and in groups, as sinners who repent after the destruction and reconcile with each other.

More to the point: Jesus deploys the reference in the context of the Day of the Lord to come. And that's after the Resurrection

of the evil as well as the good out of hades, Sodom as well as the Queen of Sheba.

BUT... THE... BUT...!

Flawless. Victory. {smile}

Rob then marshals an impressive list of OT references where the point is, not necessarily that God is prophesying the restoration of slain rebels after the resurrection to come (although that, too, sometimes!), but at least that the purpose of the punishment of God is hopeful of reconciliation. And not only positively hopeful, but prophetically certain of success, too!--whether the references are read as meaning only survivors or descendents of survivors, or of those who are raised to live again in the Day of the Lord to come.

"Failure, as we see again and again, isn't final,
"judgment has a point,
"and consequences are for correction."

(This is one of the few places where Rob acknowledges the punishment is in fact being inflicted by God.)

Even when Paul hands over Hymenaeus and Alexander to Satan in 1 Timothy, or the Stepmom-Sleeping-Guy (my nickname for him, not Rob's!) in 1 Cor 5, he expects God to still save them somehow, not only despite this punishment, but even using it for that purpose.

And so Rob leads out this chapter with a few more pretty common observations (disputable though they may be, and no he doesn't get into the disputes) about the 'eonian kolasis' of the judgment of the sheep and the goats (from the end of Matthew 25) at least possibly meaning intense correction remedial correction.

And yes, Rob has to try to shut the case too hard against his opponents on the topic of the term 'eonian' in Greek and the Hebrew word the Jews translated it for, 'olam'; for he asserts again that "'forever' is not really a category the biblical writers used", not fifteen seconds before admitting that the biblical writers do in fact use it for that purpose sometimes (as in Psalm 90 when talking about God.)

But whenever opponents want to (quite rightly) call out Rob as cheating on this, they should remember that they themselves have also routinely cheated just as much by trying to shut down their opponents with insisting on those terms necessarily meaning what they do not always necessarily mean: such as (Rob's closing example) in the prayer of Job after being swallowed by the sea-dragon (Rob only calls it a fish) and taken into the bottom of the depths of the sea--which in Jewish religious imagery is tantamount to being swallowed by Satan and imprisoned in

punishing hell. (Though Rob, avoiding the dragon imagery, doesn't press it quite that far.)

Jonah thought God had sent him down into that hell 'olam'; but repented and prayed.

God made the sea-dragon spit Jonah out three days later.

Did Jonah gratefully receive that grace and make good use of it?

No; he resented that grace out of hell, granted to him when he repented, because he knew it meant God might save those Ninevites, too.

(Which, recall, was exactly why Jonah was rebelling against God's commission in the first place. And was sent, in effect, to hell.)

Part 7: Love Wins! (Or At Least Doesn't Lose!)

Well, here we are halfway through. Rejoice!

WE'RE ONLY HALFWAY THROUGH THIS REVIEW!?!? LORD SAVE US!!!

No no, we're halfway through Rob Bell's book (or 48% at the start of chapter 4). I'm pretty sure we're far more than halfway through my review; once I stop complaining about things, I have proportionately less to write about, and I have almost nothing to complain about in this chapter! So, moving on--

WAIT, YOU'RE REALLY GOING TO JUST SKIP THIS CHAPTER?!?

Ohhhh, I suppose I could write something about it, if you insist.

...HELL, WE'RE GOING TO REGRET ASKING THAT QUESTION...

Chapter 4, "Does God Get What He Wants?", is by far the strongest of Rob's chapters up to now. Not least because he somehow manages to discuss the opposition with fair sympathy while also trenchantly critiquing their positions. Although he mostly goes after fellow Arminians, without much discussion of where he disagrees with Calvinists, that's because Rob positions his thrust here as agreeing (in essence) with Calvinist persistence to salvation. This simplifies his line of discussion, maybe a little overmuch since he doesn't spend proportionate time talking about how the Calvinist scope is too limited.

This means it shouldn't be surprising if Calvinists attack Rob's book more gung ho than Arminians do overall. (Which by the way seems to be the case.) It isn't only that they're ignoring how much he agrees with them, specifically concerning the persistence of God to salvation (although if they're fair critics they ought to be stressing his agreement on this); it's because Rob takes the scope of God's active salvation as being obviously obvious, or at worst easily established.

In short, Rob is writing as an Arminian to fellow Arminians, agreeing with them about the scope, and insisting (in effect) 'But look, the Calvs are right about God's sovereign capabilities and persistence, too! And look what happens when we put it together!'

SO ROB JUST IGNORES THE CASE FOR THE SCOPE OF GOD'S INTENTIONS TO SAVE SINNERS?

No no, he talks about it, and makes what is at least a very suggestive scriptural case for it. I especially like his references to OT scriptures affirming that God is the Father of all humanity (not merely the creator of all humanity). He doesn't only quote that famous verse from 1 Timothy 2, where God

wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, as though that settles the matter.

Nevertheless, neither does he address his readers as though they might have trouble doubting that God intends, and acts, to save all men from sin. Calvinist readers, especially ones who are trained to read such references in terms of what seems the limited scope of God's salvation elsewhere, are going to think he shortshriffs his presentation badly. And I can't exactly say I blame them for that (though I have had much stronger critiques of Rob earlier in the book.)

His whole presentation is geared, as the chapter title suggests, toward readers who (as Arminians typically do) doubt or even outright deny that God gets what He wants. His Calvinist reader will naturally answer "Of course God gets what He wants!--but He doesn't want to save all men from sin! Or maybe He vaguely does, as a side-effect of acting to save the elect from sin, but He never acts to save all men from sin."

(Not that either Calvinistic or Arminianistic Christians, even when they're trained professionals, are likely to put God's salvation in terms of saving sinners from sin. On the other hand, sometimes neither does Rob!--but he's often pretty good about that.)

While Calvinist readers may complain (somewhat rightly) that Rob doesn't give enough attention (more like no attention!) to Calvinist concerns about apparent Biblical testimony that God acts to save some and not others; Calvinist readers ought at least to be able to jump up and down agreeing with Rob in his stress on God's competent persistence.

Dedicated Calvinists, as such, wouldn't be able to agree with Rob on the scope, "The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn't give up until everything that was lost is found" (per the parables of the 100th sheep and the 10th coin). They wouldn't say that it was "tragic" for billions of people to have "been created only to spend eternity in conscious punishment and torment, suffering infinitely for the finite sins they committed in the few years they spent on earth." That's what (they believe) God wants, namely billions of sinners to exist so He can hopelessly condemn them to torment (they may not like the word 'torture') in order to be an example of God's greatness, and God gets what God wants!

But they ought to be able to agree, in regard to salvation (as well as damnation), "This God simply doesn't give up. Ever."

"In the Bible, God is not helpless,
"God is not powerless,
"and God is not impotent."

NOW HOLD UP!--YEAH THERE ARE PARABLES OF THE LOST SHEEP AND COIN (THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON ISN'T MUCH TO THE POINT SINCE IT SEEMS LIKELY THE FATHER WILL HAVE TO ZORCH HIS OLDER SON FOR BEING AN UNGRATEFUL HATEFUL GNAT-WIT), BUT THERE ARE OTHER PARABLES, TOO! WHAT DOES BELL HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THOSE!?

I could reply that the Prodigal Son doesn't seem to have been brought back by an active Father seeking and saving the lost, but is only joyfully received by a passive father who waits for him to return. But I'm willing to agree that this illustrates there are a wide range of parables and not all of them contain illustrations of all doctrines. (There is no Christ figure at all in the Prodigal Son parable, if it comes to that!)

But yes, this is one of my gripes about how Rob presents his argument in this chapter. And once again, the error comes from being unfair to his opponents.

"Is God like the characters in a story Jesus would tell?" Rob asks. But he acts like there aren't other stories and parables Jesus told. Is God like a bridegroom who locks out ten of his foolish serving-girls, when God was the one running late, and refuses to open the door and let them in when they beg for entrance? (A parable that Rob obliquely refers to later when he says that "Many have refused to accept this scenario!") Is God like the landowner who isn't concerned in the least about converting and saving the noxious weeds that were sown among his wheat, but who is only concerned about possibly damaging his wheat if he acts too soon zorching the weeds?

EXACTLY! CALVINISTS AREN'T PULLING THEIR POSITION OUT OF THEIR BUTTS!

There are even parables where (despite what Rob rhetorically asks) God seems to settle, saying, 'Well, I tried, I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure', shrugging God-sized shoulders and saying, 'You can't always get what you want.'

Is God like a king who tries to invite some people to His party, but they refuse for stupid and insulting reasons and even abuse his messengers, so that he invites the wretches of the world instead--and then throws out someone who, after being practically dragged in, refuses to wear the wedding sash the king has graciously provided? Is God like a landowner who only wants what's rightfully due to him from the workers he has hired, but they rebel against him and abuse his messengers and even murder his only son in order to inherit the vineyard--leading him to zorch them off the face of the earth in revenge?

EXACTLY! ARMINIANS AREN'T PULLING THEIR POSITION OUT OF THEIR... WAITAMINUTE...

Mm-hm. There are parables which look utterly universalistic; and parables which look quite Arminian; and parables which look entirely Calvinistic. (Or maybe not entirely; the bridegroom doesn't authoritatively choose to ensure the foolish virgins fail, and an enemy is who sowed the weeds in the wheat not the landowner. But still, the main character seems to have no intention of converting and restoring those 'characters'.)

WHICH IS WHY NONE OF US SHOULD BE GETTING OUR THEOLOGY PRIMARILY FROM PARABLES!

True--and neither is Rob. He's appealing to parables to illustrate points he has developed from other scriptural exegesis. But Calvs and Arms both do the same thing; and he acts like there isn't a scriptural case for them worth even mentioning, much less replying to.

Admittedly, that's rather like how both those other sides (Calvs and Arms) act like there isn't a scriptural case for universalism even worth mentioning, much less replying to. It isn't fair for them to do that; but neither is it fair for Rob to do the same thing the other way around.

This is probably my main problem with this chapter; and as annoying as it is, Rob quickly gets back to strong material.

It's still aimed at (fellow) Arminians, not Calvinists, because it's still phrased at answering Arminian defenses for why God doesn't get what He wants (namely the salvation of all sinners from sin); in that regard the material isn't very strong for a Calvinist reader.

But at least Rob looks seriously and sympathetically at Arminian defenses, in principle (not from scripture), for why love doesn't win.

"It's rightly pointed out," Rob agrees, "that love, by its very nature, is freedom. For there to be love, there has to be the option, both now and then, to not love. [...] If at any point God overrides, co-opts, or hijacks the human heart, robbing us of our freedom to choose, then God has violated the fundamental essence of what love even is."

A CALVINIST (AND QUITE A FEW ARMINIANS, TOO) WOULD ANSWER THAT THIS PLACES TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON ONE CHARACTERISTIC OF GOD!

Moreover, Calvinists (unlike Arminians, usually) often go far in denying that God is essentially love--not least in order to explain why God doesn't have to act in love (or at least saving love) toward the non-elect (per Calvinistic theology).

And Rob (perhaps because by his own admission he isn't a theologian and has no interest in ever being one) doesn't have, or at least doesn't give in this chapter, any reason why God's

love is so essential to what God is, that God must always act in love (even if also wrath, but a wrath in love) toward other persons.

This is where I would appeal to the precepts and doctrines of orthodox trinitarian theism; but Rob's book isn't my argument, so moving along...

Rob understands that as we choose evil it often leads to more evil, "wearing grooves in a familiar path that is easier and easier to take... on and on it goes, gaining momentum all the while... and as it becomes more and more dominant in our life, it becomes harder and harder to imagine living without it."

In a closely related defense (similar to that taken by C. S. Lewis among other theologians and apologists), if we become "less and less humane in our treatment of ourselves and others" "would a person's humanity just ebb away eventually? Could a person reach the point of no longer bearing the image of God?" In other words, could a person so destroy their personhood through sin that there's nothing left for even God to save?

Rob doesn't exactly try to answer those questions, although I think he hints at answers: "What makes us think that after a lifetime, let alone hundreds or even thousands of years, somebody who has consciously chosen a particular path away from God suddenly wakes up one day and decides to head in the completely opposite direction?" But the wording recalls the example of the Prodigal Son! And of course, as even careful Arminians would admit (much moreso any Calvinist!), that depends on God empowering and leading the person to do so. So long as God is still persisting, then that might still happen.

Or again, if God allowed a person to destroy their free will through sin, to the point where a person could no longer choose to repent (much less to the point where a person was not even any longer a person), then God in allowing that would have "violated the fundamental essence of what love even is"!--just as much as if God turned us into puppets to simply 'make us' behave 'good'.

Rob stumbles a bit, though understandably so this time, presenting (what is most likely) a popular misquote of arch-Reformer Martin Luther's question, regarding post-mortem second chances of salvation by God, "Who would doubt God's ability to do that?"

BUT CALVINISTS DON'T DOUBT GOD'S ABILITY TO DO THAT!

No, they only doubt God's intention to do that.

AND ARMINIANS DON'T ALWAYS DOUBT GOD'S ABILITY TO DO THAT!

True; soft Arminians may doubt God's ability to do that after death, but hard Arminians doubt God's intention to do that after death. Yet more importantly, soft and hard Arminians doubt God's ability to do that before death! (Whereas Calvs don't doubt God's ability to get it done before death--or if necessary after death, although that's a very rare Calv position--but they doubt God's intention to get it done at all for some or many sinners.)

ALSO, FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF CALVS AND ARMS, IT ISN'T A QUESTION OF DOUBTING IN PRINCIPLE WHETHER GOD COULD OR INTENDS TO DO THAT; IT'S A QUESTION OF WHETHER THE SCRIPTURES HAVE REVEALED GOD CAN'T OR DOESN'T INTEND TO DO IT, OR ANYWAY THAT GOD DOES NOT IN FACT DO SO!! EXPLANATIONS FOR WHY GOD DOESN'T, WHETHER ARM OR CALV IN ANY FLAVOR, FOLLOW THE DATA AS GIVEN!

It's true that Rob doesn't really address this concern, and that's a real weakness of his approach. On the other hand, Rob does at least show there's scriptural data to suggest more salvation than Arms and Calvs (either way) theologically allow!- -the complaint about following the data is fine, but it doesn't work very well when other data suggesting universal salvation is ignored; and if one set is interpreted by another set (which one way or another has to be done), the question still remains why do so? (Which tends to be a question, with answers, of metaphysical principle, regardless of whether we're talking Calv, Arm or Kath theology.)

Anyway, Rob goes with the expectation and the trust (or at least strongly respects such a trust) that given enough time "God's love will melt every heart, and even the most 'depraved sinners' will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God."

Rob throws out a handful of names, without context, as "church fathers" who either "affirmed God's reconciliation with all people" or who affirmed that many-or-most people in their day believed it. (This is Rob's other stab at establishing the position as a strong early majority that was changed.)

BUT AUGUSTINE WASN'T TALKING ABOUT "VERY MANY" PEOPLE BELIEVING IN THE ULTIMATE RECONCILIATION OF ALL THINGS!

No, the quote often attributed to him on this is pretty clearly about people who believed that there was temporary mitigation for punishments in hell at different times of the year (time off for Easter or whatever), which although he doesn't seem to have believed it he did (somewhat grudgingly) sympathize with. He stresses that even these people still believe in hopeless endless punishment, though; which raises the question of who exactly he is arguing against, to bring up a popular belief in the "refrigerium". Jerome, the Latin translator and historian, a contemporary of Augustine, had been himself a proponent of universal salvation (following Origen whom he greatly admired), until Augustine's influence in the Latin church and Origen's problematic doctrinal positions in other regards led Jerome to

renounce universal salvation and to deny he had ever even been a fan. He and Basil (both of whom Rob briefly cite) probably were talking about a popular universalistic majority, even if Augustine wasn't.

EVEN IF THEY WERE, A POPULAR MAJORITY DOESN'T MEAN MUCH!

True, popularity doesn't mean a position is true.

EVEN A SCHOLARLY MAJORITY DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN MUCH!--IF THEIR REASONING AND/OR DATA ARE FAULTY, THE MAJORITY OF PROFESSIONALS ARE STILL WRONG!!

True again. (And there is more evidence than commonly supposed that a large minority of Christian theologians, after the time of Origen if not before, were believers in universal reconciliation; maybe even suggestions of a majority in various times and places, up until sometime after the rise of Islam, although Western Europe and Northern Africa west of Egypt kept an early majority in favor of eternal conscious torment.)

Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander either way: the majority, whether popular or scholarly, whether universalistic or non-universalistic, might still be wrong.

However, as difficult as it is to suss out positions taken by various teachers and cultures in Christian history, it's still worth answering the common charge popular today that practically no one in 'orthodox' Christianity was ever a universalist. Origen, admittedly, may not count as being in the 'orthodox' party, but he still made important contributions to the eventual technical positions of the 'orthodox' majority; and Gregory of Nyssa (to pull another name from Rob's quick-draw hat) helped compose the Nicene-Chalcedonian trinitarian creed formulation. For his defenses of trinitarian theism, he is still honored among Western and Eastern Catholics as "the father of orthodoxy" and "the orthodox of the orthodox".

BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN HE WAS RIGHT ABOUT UNIVERSAL SALVATION!!

Nope. He might still be wrong about that. (Or, he might have been right in his conclusion and wrong about how exactly he got there!) The same is true for any of the other big-name universalists whom history has largely forgotten (or conveniently forgot they were universalists). Similarly, hard-core orthodoxy proponents who weren't universalists (Augustine being the most famous example) weren't necessarily right about being non-universalists despite being hard-core orthodoxy proponents.

Rob's presentation would have been fairer if he had bothered to acknowledge these things in favor of his opponents as well as in his own favor.

Still, I think he makes a fine point (one which Calvinists ought also to agree with!) when he rhetorically asks, "Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God's unrelenting, infinite, expansive love? "Thousands through the years," including practically every Calvinist, although Rob doesn't hint so, "have answered that question with the resounding response, 'God's love, of course.'"

And whether they were a small minority, a sizable minority, a small majority or a great majority, it's still undeniably true that "At the center of the Christian tradition", yes including orthodox trinitarian theism, "since the first church have been a number" (however many that number might have been) "who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God."

SO THERE'S THE BOOK TITLE!

Yep; this is a big reason why opponents and supporters say that the title of his book itself indicates Rob is being a universalist.

BUT THERE HAVE UNDENIABLY BEEN A NUMBER (HOWEVER LARGE OR SMALL, BUT AT LEAST INCREASINGLY LARGE) AT THE CENTER OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION WHO ALSO INSISTED INSTEAD THAT LOVE DOESN'T WIN!--ER, OR MAYBE THAT LOVE WINS BUT NOT THAT WAY!

Rob does acknowledge this, too; but he acknowledges it in a way that gives priority to reassuring the universalists (and even moreso the non-Christians who might convert if they thought love wins that way) that you don't have to believe in hopeless punishment to be a Christian. "The Christian faith is big enough, wide enough, and generous enough to handle that vast a range of perspectives."

BUT BELL DOESN'T LIKE TO ALLOW THE SAME THING THE OTHER WAY AROUND!!

Unfortunately true. In fact, right after saying his he writes that "It's important that we be honest about the fact that some stories are better than others." Guess which stories he thinks are worse.

THE STORIES TOLD BY CALVS AND ARMS!

Good guess. {wry grin}

Now, aside from the fact that I agree with him that those aren't as good a story (in any sense) as universal reconciliation and salvation from sin, at least Rob isn't trying to pretend that all theological ideas are equally true and so equally worthy of acceptance. That's fair enough.

But neither does he give much indication of really being prepared to respect his opponents the way he wants them to respect universalists (or whatever half-semi-quasi-version he thinks he is but isn't.) This chapter is stronger than usual in his book because he does here go further than usual in respecting his opponents. He criticizes non-universalists for "failing to extend grace" to universalists; but he doesn't do very well at extending grace back himself.

Except maybe in this way: after all he says and does, after all his emphases on God's persistence as well as scope of salvation, even after a (relatively) brief but suggestive look at the end result of the Revelation to John (where he actually doesn't mention several things that might add more weight to the hope of the eventual success of God's evangelism)--after all this, Rob Bell still says we don't need to (and cannot) resolve or answer the questions "Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices?" Instead of resolving and answering those questions "We simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires."

HUH--DOESN'T SEEM TO US LIKE HE HAS RESPECTED ARM AND CALV ANSWERS TO THOSE QUESTION MUCH!

Yeah, he seems more concerned with leaving room for answering yes to "will everybody be saved". But by backing off his insistence on the persistence of God, he does leave room for some kind of Arminianism to maybe be true after all.

NOT SOME KIND OF CALVINISM, TOO?

No, Rob constantly insists on the scope of God's salvation; so no he doesn't even remotely leave room for Calvinism (compared to Arminianism) to be true.

So when Rob declares that "Hard and fast, definitive declarations then, about how God will or will not organize the new world must leave plenty of room for all kinds of those possibilities", he definitely isn't leaving room for the possibility that God's scope of salvation in organizing the new world isn't total. He only leaves room for God to not persist, or to incompetently persist.

WHICH ROB HAS DEFINITELY DECLARED GOD WILL SURELY DO!

Yes; his attempt at backing out here looks very inconsistent.

He also definitively declares that whether or not God gets what He wants, we humans will certainly "resoundingly, affirming, sure and positive" get what we want. "God is that loving." If we want hell, we get hell.

WHAT IF WE WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE IN HELL AND NOT BE BOTHERED BY GOD?

Uh, no, apparently we don't get that if we want it.

WHAT IF WE WANT TO BE SINNERS WITHOUT ANY CONSEQUENCES WE WOULD RATHER AVOID FROM DOING SO?

Um... nope, Rob definitively declares we won't get that either.

WHAT IF WE WANT TO OPPRESS OTHER PEOPLE FOREVER WITHOUT INTERFERENCE FROM GOD SAYING 'ENOUGH, NO FURTHER'?

Nopity nope nope; Rob assures us we won't get that, no matter how much we may want to.

OKAY!--JUST CHECKING ON WHETHER BELL IS TALKING REAL SENSE HERE OR IS ONLY BEING RHETORICALLY CONVENIENT AGAIN!!

Yep, he's being rhetorically convenient again. Although this time, he isn't being rhetorically convenient against his opponents. If anything he's being rhetorically convenient in their favor! Or anyway in favor of soft Arminianism.

Or maybe not in their favor? Because he turns around again and affirms that (as Arminians would eventually deny, one way or another, not to say Calvinists, too!) "Love always leaves room of the other to decide."

Rob may, at the end, throw away all (or most) he has talked about concerning the persistence of God to lead sinners to repentance and salvation; reducing God to standing around waiting like the father of the Prodigal for his son to come to his senses and come home.

But if Rob, at the end, refuses to say for sure that love wins, in the sense he strongly insisted upon earlier in the chapter...

at least he insists love wins in the sense

that love

doesn't

lose.

Part 8: Taking It Personally

I have even less to complain about in Chapter 5. I don't suppose this means I can just skip it and proceed along...?

NO! WE NEED EVERY LAST COMPLAINT FROM YOU! AAAALLLLL OFFFFF
THHHHEMMMMMMM!!!!!!!!11!!!

Sigh. Oooooookaaayyy.

My biggest gripe about this chapter is really only a passing gripe from back in chapter 1. It's more of a joke at the expense of Rob's rhetorical ineptitude than anything.

REALLY?

Yep. Remember when Rob critiqued a particular defense of hopeless punishment by stating that "the problem" with this defense was that the phrase "personal relationship" doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible? And then just moved along as though that settled the matter?--or even made a lick of sense to say, considering how extremely often the topic of personal relationships (including in regard to salvation) shows up in the Bible?

OH, YEAH! BWA-HAHAHAHAHAHA! AHHH... GOOD TIMES... WAIT, DOES HE QUOTE THE BIBLE NOW WHERE IT USES THE PHRASE "PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP"!?

No.

DANG.

But he does emphasize the reality and importance of personal relationships here, including with Jesus and in regard to salvation.

OKAY, THAT'S ALMOST AS FUNNY! NOW THAT WE THINK OF IT, HASN'T HE BEEN DOING THAT SEVERAL TIMES BETWEEN THEN AND NOW?

Yes, I just had other things to comment and complain about so I didn't bother to mention it.

I'm going to mostly be complimenting (and somewhat summarizing) Rob now; but you're entirely welcome to interject a hoot about "PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS!" whenever we run across something of that sort. It'll be fun. {smile} Just don't use it as an excuse to ignore the other things.

SIGH. OOOOOOOOKAAAYYY.

I like Rob's introductory remarks that the cross has become the most successful 'logo' in world history, but that its success is paradoxically so strong that people tend to use it to mean

whatever. (I'm frankly a bit doubtful that Rob's example, the rapper Eminem, converted to Christianity in any meaningful way during his absence, seeing as how a cross is part of the stylized rapper-gangster "bling". But I won't diss Rob's charitable pondering on the topic.)

And even when people try to represent some religious meaning with it, the basic concept is so familiar ("Jesus died on the cross for your sins") that the meaning, or the meanings, can be lost.

MEANINGS? PLURAL?

Yes, because as Rob rightly and colorfully reports, the New Testament authors (and even Jesus by report in the Gospels) describe what the cross means in several different fashions.

First (and I love his "Didn't see that coming, did you?" approach to this), it means the end of the whole culture of religious sacrifice as an attempt to maintain a peaceful relationship--

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP!!

Heh. --with the gods. (Or with God, although Rob shies away, for whatever reason, from explicitly acknowledging that the Hebrews were doing this in their tabernacles and Temples and elsewhere by the express command of God. But his basic point stands without having to go into the complexities of acknowledging this.)

Jesus, on the cross, is the ultimate sacrifice (by God Himself) that thoroughly pleased the only God Who ever mattered.

Or again, Paul in Colossians 1 writes that through the cross God was making peace through the blood of Jesus, reconciling all things to Himself. Reconciling, Rob rightly says, is "a word from the world of relationships" where two persons--

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS!! WITH GOD!! FOR SALVATION!!

Heh. --have found a way to work out the differences between them and come back together. Peace has been made.

OH. UH... BUT WE... WE THOUGHT 'RECONCILE' MEANT...

Yes?

IT CAN'T MEAN MAKING PEACE!!

Why not?

BECAUSE THEN UNIVERSALISM WOULD BE OBVIOUSLY TAUGHT IN THE...
UH... WE MEAN, BECAUSE THEN THE BIBLE WOULD CONTRADICT ITSELF!!!

Obviously one set of verses has to be interpreted in light of another set; or both sets in light of some third set or in light of some guiding principle.

ALL RIGHT BUT WHAT ABOUT ATONEMENT!?

You mean at-one-ment?

YEAH!--UH... WHAT?

That's how the word is supposed to be pronounced; it was coined in English originally to get across the meaning of {katallos} (or conciliation in Latin) and similar cognates in Greek. You aren't supposed to pronounce it a-tone-ment. (Although if you do you should think in terms of two things coming into harmony of tones together!)

Not that Rob gets into any of this. In my opinion he should have taken some time to do so, because most other teachers aren't likely to teach it, even if they know it themselves--because then... well... {wry grin} they'd be teaching that God acts to save all creatures in heaven and earth from sin, actively reconciling them to Himself through His sacrifice on the cross.

And that would be 'heresy'! Also, incidentally, it would be exactly what St. Paul teaches in Colossians. Oh noes. :shock:

NOW WAIT WAIT WAIT JUST A MINUTE. ARMINIANS HAVE LONG BEEN AWARE THAT PAUL IS TEACHING THE RECONCILIATION OF ALL THINGS, NOT ONLY SOME, ON THE CROSS!

Until you make exceptions. Unlike St. Paul.

WE DON'T MAKE EXCEPTIONS! ALL MEN EVERYWHERE ARE INCLUDED! UNTIL AFTER DEATH! EVEN THEN THEY'RE STILL INCLUDED; GOD JUST GIVES UP ON THEM OR IS FORCED TO QUIT TRYING TO RECONCILE THEM! OR MAYBE STOPS ACTING TO RECONCILE ANYONE AFTER THE CROSS, LEAVING IT ENTIRELY UP TO US AFTERWARD... sigh... BUT THE POINT IS EVERYONE IS INCLUDED!! THAT'S PRACTICALLY OUR BIGGEST EVANGELICAL POINT, AND IT'S SUPER IMPORTANT FOR SAKE OF EVANGELISM!!! WE CAN BE SURE EVERYONE HAS AT LEAST A LITTLE OPPORTUNITY TO BE SAVED!-- AT LEAST IN PRINCIPLE IF NOT IN PRACTICE!!

Well, that was sufficiently qualified! {wry grin}

WE HAVE TO QUALIFY THE GLORIOUS RECONCILIATION OF ALL THINGS TO GOD, IN ORDER TO COMPORT WITH THE GLORIOUS AND/OR TRAGIC CONDEMNATION OF SOME OR MOST THINGS TO HOPELESS PUNISHMENT!

I understand; I used to be the same way myself.

AND NOW, NO DOUBT, YOU THINK GOD EVEN RECONCILES DEVILS TO HIMSELF. FEH!

Whereas, Arminians don't.

NOT HARDLY!

So in fact you do make exceptions. God isn't in fact reconciling all things to Himself on the cross. Just like the Calvinists teach.

...WELL, NO. BUT PAUL DOESN'T... HE DOESN'T REALLY MEAN ALL THINGS...

Isn't "all things I say, whether in the heavens or on the earth" still in the Bible?

YEAH, BUT... BUT THAT ISN'T ALL THINGS IN HELL! OR UNDER THE EARTH! OR WHATEVER!

So what things in the heavens have sinned and need reconciling to God, if not rebel angels?

THE... BUT... BUT THAT'S MERELY POTENTIALLY SO!

If God chose for it to count.

RIGHT! AND HE DOESN'T!

He doesn't elect them for salvation, in other words, even though He testifies (through St. Paul at least) that His work (in the fullness of His deity) was entirely sufficient to reconcile them, too.

ALL RIGHT FINE! WE JUST BECAME CALVINISTS!

After all, hopelessness in the gospel has to be affirmed somehow, right?

EXACTLY!--WAIT...

I should mention here that Calvinists will not typically affirm that God was actually acting to reconcile all things to Himself either; because persistence of God's salvation is extremely important to their theology. If He even intends (much more so acts) to reconcile someone, to save them from sin, then He keeps at it until He gets it done. They have to read in a merely potential static reconciliation of all things, when Paul says God was reconciling all things to Himself on the cross. Or they have to ignore or discount Paul's own emphasis of scope "all things I say!--whether in the heavens or on the earth!", which specifically parallels Paul's immediate previous insistence on Christ being the highest Lord conceivable in creating union with the Father. The scope of Christ's power and authority parallels the scope of Christ's salvation of sinners from sin: they stand or fall together.

RIGHT! THAT'S... THAT'S WHY WE'RE ARMINIANS!!

Because of the total scope of God's action to save, testified here (among other places).

EXACTLY!--WAIT...

We're kind of getting away from dealing with Rob's argument, so I'll spare you further disconcertion on this point and get back to summarizing him.

PAUL DOES SAY SOON AFTERWARD THAT HE HOPES AND TRUSTS HIS READERS WON'T GO BACK TO BEING UNRECONCILED TO GOD, YOU KNOW!

I know. I'm not discounting the intransigence of sinners. That's important to keep in the account, too. But I trust first and foremost in God (including to save). I don't trust first and foremost in sinners (not to be saved or otherwise)! How about you?! {smile}

...LET'S JUST GET BACK TO ROB'S BOOK.

Right.

Having very briefly touched on Colossians 1 (and to be fair his point here wasn't to do a full argument from there, only to show different ways the Bible talks about what was accomplished on the cross), Rob moves to Romans 3 where Paul writes that we've been justified by grace through faith in Jesus. That's a legal metaphor from the world of courtrooms and judges: we're guilty, standing before the judged with no hope, except for Jesus Christ, Who pays our price and sets us free. (I will mention here that this is not very obviously what Romans 3:21-26 says, but Rob is certainly reporting a common interpretation of what it means.)

But then there are also battle images of victory and destruction, provided by Paul and John (for example) in 2 Timothy 2 and 1 John 5 (respectively).

And there are the times (such as in Ephesians) when what happened on the cross is expressed as "redemption" which is financial accounting language.

BUT ALL THOSE MEANINGS MEAN ONE THING ULTIMATELY, EXPRESSED IN DIFFERENT WAYS!

I tend to agree, and I suspect Rob does, too; but he doesn't go out of his way to nail down (or nail up!) that one common meaning.

YOU SUSPECT...?

In his final list of New Testament meanings, he adds one to the end which isn't actually a cited image from the NT, and which isn't at all a metaphorical description, but is a theme common to all the others:

"enemies being loved".

UH... OKAY WE GUESS WE CAN AGREE WITH THAT, TOO; BUT WE MEANT THAT THEY ALL MEAN GOD THE FATHER PUNISHED HIS INNOCENT SON SO THAT HE COULD KEEP HIS LAW THAT SOMEONE, EVEN IF THEY AREN'T ACTUALLY GUILTY, HAS TO SUFFER INFINITELY FOR ANY SIN! WHICH WE NOTICE ROB DOESN'T MENTION, THAT HERETIC!!

That could be said to be tacitly included in Rob's category of judicial metaphor.

BUT IT'S MORE THAN A METAPHOR! BELL DOESN'T BELIEVE IN ANY ATONEMENT BECAUSE HE TREATS THEM ALL AS ONLY BEING METAPHORICAL!! WE KNOW BECAUSE OPPOSITIONAL REVIEWERS HAVE TOLD US SO!!!

Actually, he thinks all the Biblical explanations are true. (Although I gather from other things that have been said, not necessarily in LW, that he does in fact reject penal substitution theory of the sort mentioned above. {wry grin} But he does accept that the work of Jesus on the cross somehow frees those under judicial penalty.)

Yes, he talks about them being metaphorical, but not reductively so. He thinks the images represent a truth larger than any of the images, and so none of the images should be left out or minimized in favor of one predominate way of talking about what happened on the cross.

"The point, then, isn't to narrow it to one particular metaphor, image, explanation, or mechanism. To elevate one [way of talking about what happened Biblically] over the others, to insist that there's a 'correct' or 'right' one," by which Rob means insisting that there's only one correct or right way of Biblically talking about what was accomplished on the cross, "is to miss the brilliant, creative work these first Christians were doing when they used these images and metaphors. They were reading their world, looking for ways to communicate this epic event in ways their listeners could grasp.

"The point then, as it is now, is Jesus. The divine in flesh and blood. He's where the life is."

Now, having talked some about the meaning (and meanings!) of the cross and what Jesus accomplished on it, Rob goes on to talk about the resurrection and what Jesus accomplished there!

I do have a minor gripe about Rob's claim that "resurrection" after death was not a new idea in Jesus' day. The sort of rebirth he's talking about which was popular and prevalent, is not the same thing as resurrection--even bodily resurrection. But taken as a preparation for the gospel, it fits well enough. The discussion here is similar to that from Lewis on the subject, including in his account of his own conversion where he was impressed how the resurrection of Christ historically fulfilled and transcended the pagan themes of death and rebirth in nature. Rob is a Lewis fan, so there's a good chance he had Lewis in mind when writing this part!

I like how Rob even goes a step farther than Lewis, in talking about how we all live by feeding on the death of something else, whether that's dead plants or dead animals. But he doesn't relate this very well to the actual resurrection, and the theme that ultimately we live by the voluntary self-sacrifice of the Living One Himself. In the end he only vaguely connects the death-into-life of the resurrection with the topic of the mystery of death-into-life we find in nature and in human relations--

WAIT!--DOES HE ACTUALLY REFERENCE PERSONAL RELATIONS HERE?

Yep, in the death of heroes for the sake of other people. Which of course pagan antiquity would have known something about and admired, although often their heroes died for something less or other than--

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS!!!

Heh.

Rob's second point in regard to the resurrection is supposed to be that the first Christians understood the resurrection (and the cross) "to be an event as wide as the world, extending to all of creation."

He picks a weird way to try to show this, though. First he appeals to seven signs in GosJohn, even though John stops numbering the signs early leaving more dubiousness than Rob acknowledges about how many signs are supposed to be there; then connects this with the seven days of creation in Genesis, which complete God's creation; then posits the resurrection as the official eighth sign of GosJohn; which happens in a garden; like the seven days (which are really only six days in Hebrew reckoning, since the seventh day, the Day of the Lord, hasn't actually come yet); which means it's the eight day of creation (not mentioned anywhere in scripture); and so the resurrection applies to all creation.

Um, the end. You can comment now.

WE DON'T RECALL JOHN CLAIMING ANY OF THIS IN GOSJOHN. AND WE DOUBT BELL SUPPLIES REFERENCES.

Your doubts are well-founded. No, it's just an esoteric completely implicit guess that's based on semi-faulty data.

HAH! WE CALVINISTS KNEW HE HAD NOTHING TO GO ON!!

Yes, not all Christians are going to accept this, which is why I'm a bit perturbed that Rob chose this way as his big gun for the topic. Surely it's pretty, and suggestive, and suggestively pretty, but it isn't even pretty suggestive!

The problem I have with it is not that I'm a dull logic-chopping wet-blanket; I write whole books of colorful suggestive thematic ideas for evangelism (as well as whole books of dull logic-chopping. {grin}) My problem with it isn't even that his illustration hangs on definitely defining things that are undefined or defined different ways in the scriptures. My problem is that half his opponents (theologically speaking) are going to have problems with the claim being made here and he leads out with this frothy castle of cloud as though it clearly settles the matter. Ta-daa!

(Okay, this may be the thing that annoys me most in the actual chapter, not the amusing references to something he discounted over-conveniently near the start of his book because a particular phrase didn't appear in the Bible. {wry grin})

BUT WE ARMINIANS KNOW THERE ARE STRONG DEFINITE THINGS BEING SAID IN THE SCRIPTURES ON THIS TOPIC!!--THOUGH YEAH BELL IS GOOFING AROUND WITH HIS OPENING MOVE THERE...

And Rob does eventually start talking about those stronger definite things being said. He doesn't go into any details in his brief textual references (because it's a popular-written book, no doubt); which leaves them very open to Calv rebuttal attempts, none of which he even tries to discuss or anticipate (except to suggest in principle that "a gospel that leaves out its cosmic scope will always feel small.")

He saves the strongest for last, perhaps, since it's much harder to get around statements like Jesus "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2).

CALVS DO HAVE THINGS TO SAY ABOUT THAT, TOO, YOU KNOW.

I know; but here as elsewhere the book is written mainly to Rob's fellow Arminians (on one hand) and to non-Christians (on the other) who naturally feel like they've either been judged by other Christians already as being non-elect (and so utterly hopeless even in principle for gospel outreach) or who doubt on

Calv plans whether Christ really has any interest in saving them or even loving them in any substantial way.

I expect this is what Rob has in mind when he writes disapprovingly that "a gospel that repeatedly, narrowly affirms and bolsters the 'in-ness' of one group at the expense of the 'out-ness' of another group will not be true to the story that includes 'all things and people in heaven and on earth'."

Notice--

BUT THAT'S LIKE SAYING THERE'S NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS!! AND EVEN ASIDE FROM SIMPLY IGNORING CALVINISTIC CONCERNS ABOUT SCRIPTURAL TESTIMONY ON THE IN-ELECT AND OUT-NON-ELECT, IT'S FLAT CHEATING TO PRETEND LIKE THE SCRIPTURES TREAT CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS AS THOUGH THEOLOGICALLY THEY'RE THE SAME!!!

--Rob isn't talking about theological differences.

He's talking about gospel outreach, and whether a gospel outreach has a built-in (even if tacit) clause of necessary exclusion: no, the gospel was never, is never, and will never be for you.

That's admittedly a theological difference, but it's a difference between Christians, not a difference between types of theism (or atheism).

OH.

And it leads to Rob's third point: the cross and resurrection are personal.

Go ahead. You might as well call it:

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS!!!

Heh.

There are plenty of good things in this chapter, but I'll end out this part with a quote from here near the end.

"This cosmic event has everything to do with how every single one of us lives every single day. It is a pattern, a rhythm, a practice, a reality rooted in the elemental realities of creation, extending to the very vitality of our soul.

"When we say yes to God, when we open ourselves to Jesus's living, giving act on the cross, we enter into a way of life. He is the source, the strength, the example, and the assurance that this pattern of death and rebirth is the way into the only kind of life that actually sustains and inspires."

And any Calv or Arm,
Protestant or otherwise,
ought to be able
to agree
with that.

Part 9: Rock On

Well, this Part will be even more boring than the previous one, because I have only a few inconsequential gnat-picks with Rob's chapter 6. I don't suppose I can just skip ahead to chapter 7...?

WE DEMAND THAT EVERY POSSIBLE DARKNESS BE UNEARTHED SO AS TO EXPOSE THIS HERETIC FOR THE AGENT OF SATAN HE IS!!! SO--PROCEED!

No.

HAH!--ROB BELL IS SO RIDICULOUS WHEN HE DOES THINGS LIKE... WHAT?

No. It means, "No".

AT LAST THEN. AT LAST YOU'RE GOING TO SHOW YOUR TRUE COLORS AND REFUSE TO SMITE HIM WHEN HE DESERVES IT. WHAT BELL DOES IN THIS CHAPTER MUST BE HIS KEY TO EVERYTHING, WHICH YOU DON'T WANT TO WRITE AGAINST BECAUSE THEN YOU WOULD BE UNDERMINING YOURSELF. ADMIT IT! ADMIT IT!!!!!!

Okay, sure, why not? In this chapter is Rob's key to everything, which I don't want to write against because then I would be undermining myself. Let's go with that, shall we?

AH-HAAAA!!! YOU ADMIT IT!!! FINALLY!!! VICTORY!!!!!!

So, you insist I cover this chapter, then, and not ignore the key to what Rob's doing?

YES! YES! YES!YES!YES!YES!YESSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!!!!

So be it. {smile}

Rob starts off with two stories of people being convicted of their sins by God in mystical experiences (one in practically a death experience), leading them to repent and change their lives for the better, seeking God's forgiveness and healing.

HAH!--WHAT PAGAN HERETIC ROT BELL INSISTS ON... WAIT, WHAT?

Sorry, I happen to be listening to a particularly awesome rap/rock version of the Libera Me mass right now, and I'm too busy praising Jesus Christ for His mighty saving victories to type coherently. Please continue. (Do the impossible, see the invisible, touch the untouchable, break the unbreakable--row, row, fight the power! {big smile})

OKAY, UH... YOU DIDN'T MENTION JESUS CHRIST, SO, UH... SO WHAT DID ANY OF THOSE STORIES HAVE TO DO WITH JESUS CHRIST!? HA!--SO THERE!

Jesus Christ is the life-giving Word of God incarnate, Who acted to convict those people of their sin and lead them to repentance and salvation; the Word Who is the living action of God and so is God Himself; Who brings order out of chaos, indeed brings even the chaos of the universe into existence, and continues to give life to all things. Through Jesus all things were made (John 1). Jesus is the One "through Whom [God the Father] made the universe." (Hebrews 1) "He is before all things" (Colossians 1). He is "the very one Who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (Ephesians 4): Jesus Christ, the one "through Whom all things came and through Whom we live." (1 Corinthians 8)

God, this ultimate God, became a man. Are you open or closed to that?

UH... OPEN, OBVIOUSLY. BUT...

Rob insists that when people saw Jesus, and see Jesus today, that 1st century rabbi who healed and called disciples and challenged the authorities to the point of death, we see the divine in skin and bones, the Word in flesh and blood. Jesus isn't someone or something God cooked up at the last minute when we made a mess of things. Jesus, the Son, was there all along from the beginning and still is today as the action of God Who Himself is God. In the Incarnation, Jesus exposes what God has been up to all along.

THAT... WELL, YES, BUT THAT...

What God has been up to all along, the mystery of God's good pleasure which God has made known to us (Ephesians 1), is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

RIGHT, YES, BUT BY THAT GOD MEANS--!

All things. God is putting the world back together, which only God can do, through and as Jesus.

NO, NO, NOT ALL THINGS, ONLY US, THE CHOSEN ONES--!

God chooses to do this among and for the Gentiles, too, making known among them the glorious richness of His this mystery. (Colossians 1)

FINE, YES, AMONG JEWS AND GENTILES BOTH, BUT ONLY FOR US AMONG ALL PEOPLE JEWS AND GENTILES BOTH!!

Just as many Jews, who knew themselves to be the elect of God, refused in Paul's day to think that whatever God was doing, it couldn't be for Gentiles, too. It could only be for them, God's elect; only through and only for them, the ones who believed and lived like them already.

And now many Christians believe the same as those Jews did. Us, not them. We, not you. Those Jews were wrong to believe that, but these Christians suppose themselves right to believe that.

BECAUSE THEY REJECTED AND SINNED AGAINST THE MESSIAH!!

Just as we all have sinned (so rejecting God, thus also rejecting the Messiah) and fallen short of the glory of God; yet (despite what those Jews thought) God does not wait for us to be righteous before sending Himself as the Messiah to save us and lead us to righteousness. Our salvation is not by works, but by grace unto faith, lest any man should boast.

Y--YEAH, BUT--!

Thus the mystery of God's righteousness, which has existed since before time began, is to be proclaimed so that all people everywhere may come to the full riches of complete understanding.

And that mystery, hidden in God, true and present with God since time began: that mystery is God made into man. Christ Jesus.

ROB BELL SAYS ALL THIS??!

I'm synopsisizing. But I'm also quoting heavily. The answer is yes, he says all this.

THIS... THAT CAN'T BE TRUE! WE WERE TOLD BY PEOPLE WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHAT WAS IN THIS BOOK THAT ROB PREACHED A TOTALLY DIFFERENT GOD AND A SALVATION BY WORKS AND NO REPENTANCE FROM SIN AND--AND--THEY ASSURED US THIS WAS TRUE ABOUT ROB BELL!!!

I don't know what Rob has written or said before this book, and I don't know everything of what Rob has said (or written) after this book.

But I've read the book. And I've gone into detail about the book. And I've critiqued Rob with some hard words when he is being unfair to his opposition. And I've gone into detail about that, too.

I've done all that so readers who haven't bothered to pay much attention to the book, or who thought or heard they shouldn't pay attention to the book, will believe me when I report what is in the book.

And this is in the book.

Now, I could gripe a bit about the minor gaffes Rob makes in this chapter. But that would be distracting from his key material in this chapter. Because none of those gaffes are due to unfairness to his opposition; all of them are easily fixable;

and when fixed they do not remotely harm his key material in this chapter--which in the end is his key material for the whole book.

He preaches Christ the one and only Lord Most High and Son of God; and he preaches Christ crucified: drawing all men to Himself when He is lifted up from the earth, giving His flesh as bread for the life of the world.

Jesus takes our salvation from sin that seriously. He is willing to die for this, "for the life of the world" (John 6). To die, and to rise again.

We can point to Him, name Him, follow Him, discuss Him, honor Him, and believe in Him--but we cannot claim Him to be ours more so than He is anyone else's. We are His; He is only ours in that we, we all are His. He is not ultimately only the god of a tribe. He is ultimately the Lord and the God of us all; and as the Lord and the God of us all (even though, especially though we are sinners against Him) He gives His life to die and rise again.

Therefore the gospel of Christ is to be proclaimed, and has in Christ been proclaimed, to every creature under heaven. As wide as creation. Including everybody. The whole world.

BELL SAYS THAT!?!?

He does.

BUT... BUT HE HAS TO MEAN... HE HAS TO MEAN THAT JESUS IS ONLY ONE OF THE WAYS TO THE FATHER! HE HAS TO!--HE'S A UNIVERSALIST!!!

Rob insists (quoting Jesus from John 14) that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no man comes to the Father but through Him.

RIGHT!--BUT... BUT THAT MEANS...

Whatever, whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through Jesus Christ. Jesus is exclusively the way to God.

BUT ROB REJECTS EXCLUSIVITY! WE KNOW HE DOES! STOP CONFUSING IN OUR HEARTS WHAT WE KNOW TO BE TRUE!!!

He only rejects the exclusivity of Jesus acting only to save some, of being the Savior only of some, instead of being the real, true, one and only Savior of all (though especially of those who believe).

He also very explicitly and specifically rejects the inclusivity that thinks all religions are equally true, or that good people

will get in on their own merits by having their actions measure up enough, by earning their way into the kingdom.

Instead Rob Bell insists Jesus is the only way, the only all-embracing, saving love and Way.

"As soon as the door [to Christ's salvation] is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying that then Jesus doesn't matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn't matter what you believe, and so forth.

"Not true.

"Absolutely, unequivocally, unalterably not true.

"What Jesus does is declare that he,
"and he alone
"is saving everybody."

"He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation."

When Rob Bell refers to Jesus Christ, he is referring to the very life source of all reality Who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with His love and power and grace and energy.

Not a token of tribal membership. Not a tamed mascot who waves the flag and promotes the values of a political group or nation. Not the supposed source of an imperial impulse to conquer the world. Not a slogan. Not a logo.

But the Logos.

The baptism of Christ, lowered like Christ into His death, raised like Christ into His life, is not only "true for us". It is true, and so is true for everybody.

The table of Christ, when we enact and remember Jesus' gift of Himself on the cross, His body, His blood, for the life of the world, our bodies, our lives, in His, for the life of the world, is not only "true for us". It is true, and so is true for the world--and for the life of the world.

"These rituals are true for us, because they're true for everybody. They unite us, because they unite everybody. They are signs and glimpses and tastes of what is true for all people in all places at all times--we simply name the mystery present in the world, the gospel already announced to every creature under heaven." The Mystery Who holds the entire universe in His embrace, Who exists within and without time, Who is the flesh-and-blood exposure of an eternal reality, Who is the sacred power present in every dimension of creation.

"He is the rock, and there is water for the thirsty there,
wherever there is."

Rock on, Rob Bell!

Part 10: The Prodigal Gospel

Rejoice!--this is essentially Rob's last chapter (chp 8 is an epilogue), and so we come also to the end of my fraternally anticipated questions. I said rejoice!!

DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING BAD TO SAY ABOUT THIS CHAPTER, OR WILL YOU SKIP THROUGH IT SUMMARIZING LIKE LAST TIME?

It happens I have a few things to gripe about in this chapter.

WE REJOICE!!!

But not many. Only one major gripe really.

DANG.

The key theme for this chapter is whether or not we will trust that God persistently loves us.

DOES BELL EMPHASIZE THE SCOPE?

Very much so!

DOES BELL EMPHASIZE THE PERSISTENCE?

Yep, that too.

DOES HE CALL IT UNIVERSALISM?

Hell no. And he warns near the end (in chapter 8) that we had better take seriously various warnings provided in parables (and elsewhere, but he uses parables as the examples), because so long as we don't we're going to be missing out on sharing God's life, in this life and in the next.

Although, it must also be said that while Rob does warn about consequences for the next life, when reporting about the parables he treats them in a way that could be read as only involving consequences for this life before death: "We won't get the [opportunity] right in front of us again. That specific moment will pass and we will not see it again. It comes, it's here, it goes, and then it's gone. Jesus reminds us in a number of ways that it is vitally important we take our choices here and now as seriously as we possibly can because they matter more than we can begin to imagine."

He doesn't specifically restrict those parables (all the examples of which he mentions, feature Christ returning in judgment) to mattering only now. But an incautious or uncharitable reader might forget or overlook what Rob himself has stressed elsewhere on this topic, and so read it that way.

WHICH PARABLES DOES HE REFERENCE?

Ones "in which things did not turn out well for the people involved", as he acknowledges: the lazy servant with the treasure who hid it instead of investing; the five foolish wedding maidens; the goats; the vineyard tenants; the weeds among the wheat.

AND WHICH OF THOSE PARABLES INVOLVE "CHANCES" FOR SALVATION AFTERWARD?

None of them overtly (although the one about the baby goats hints strongly at it by story context--but Rob doesn't present it as being hopeful, so he probably doesn't know about those details yet. Including that it's about baby goats!)

SO HE'S JUST READING IN HIS OWN ITCHY-EAR WISHFUL THINKING TO DELUDE HIS READERS INTO HOPING OTHERWISE!!!

That's one way to put it. Another way would be he's reading in information told elsewhere in the Bible, OT and NT, including in some other parables of Jesus, indicating the story of those parables doesn't end with the end of those parables.

For example, he spends most of chapter 7 focusing on the parable of the prodigal son (some of the details of which he seems to have gotten, according to his nod in the end-notes, from Timothy Keller's *The Prodigal God*.)

That parable doesn't end with the prodigal son dying alone in hellishly miserable circumstances thanks to his sins.

Instead the son repents, even though he thinks he can't be forgiven, but trusts his father's goodness enough to hope to at least be a slave of his father. In fact his father has already forgiven him, and is entirely prepared to lavish extravagance on his son who had been "dead but now he lives" and "lost but now is found". (The word for lost there even means destroyed!--as it does in the parables of the 100th sheep and the 10th silver coin. In terms of the stories they hadn't literally been destroyed, but in terms of what the stories analogize...? Rob doesn't mention this factor, but I thought I would. {smile})

The older son, however, turns out (in a very interesting reading of the parable) to have been in hell at home!--and isn't inclined to come out of it yet!

WHAT?! THAT'S RIDICULOUS! HE'S WITH THE FATHER THE WHOLE TIME!

Yes, but he doesn't appreciate it. He resents his father to the point of telling some pretty obvious untruths about his father to try to justify his hatred of his father's acceptance of the repentant son. "All these years I have been slaving for you!--but he wasn't a slave, he had everything of his father's all the time. (Yet he thought he had to earn his place with his father,

and resents his father not acknowledging that he has earned the gifts of his father.)

"Yet you never even gave me a baby-goat to celebrate with my friends!" (There's one of the two uses of the term 'baby-goat' in the New Testament, by the way. The other is in the judgment of the goats!) That's practically like saying they never even got a chicken. But the father clearly dotes on his children, and he quickly corrects his son about this. After all, the father had already divided up everything as if he had died!--the oldest son had all his share already!

Each son thinks poorly of his father, not only the youngest son. This, although Rob doesn't mention it, is also the main problem with the lazy servant in the parable of the talents: he explains his actions by representing his king like a bandit-chieftain!--a common form of flattery in the Near Middle East (even today), but very much not an ethical compliment! The youngest son exploits his father, but does at least repent of this even though he cannot imagine being received back as a son. The oldest son exploits his father and doesn't (yet) repent! Consequently he's miserable, even while a party is going on behind him that he could join at any time.

BUT THE PARTY IS FOR HIS BROTHER WHOM HE HATES!

Yes, so? Why does he hold onto hate for his brother, when his father clearly doesn't!? His father even rebukes him on this!

Christians, of all people, shouldn't be putting themselves in the place of the older brother in the parable! And, though he doesn't say it in quite that way, this is a big part of Rob's point. The younger brother didn't trust his father's version of the story; but neither does the older brother. In fact, the older brother not only has a story about himself different (and much less good news) than the father's story about that son, but he utterly refuses to accept the father's love for the younger brother--not only before the younger brother repents, but even afterward!

The older son, in effect, is also in hell.

This leads to one of my few small gripes with this chapter: Rob's infamous statements suggesting that people who believe in a hopeless hell don't throw good parties or create good art.

AND YOU HAVE ONLY A SMALL GRIPE WITH THAT!?!?

Yes, because while he puts it in a way that's somewhat unfair to his opposition (but not altogether--it's hard to imagine early American Calvinists throwing good parties or creating good art), what he's actually trying to do is talk in context of the older son of the parable. He overreaches, in a spirit of unfairness to

his opposition, but this time the context ought to be understandable--if anyone is concerned about being fair to Rob, even when Rob is being unfair.

WHY SHOULD WE BOTHER TO BE FAIR TO SOMEONE WHO ISN'T BEING FAIR TO US!?

Because that's the right thing to do.

This kind of attitude truly puzzles me; I can understand being angry and led into unfairness, especially in return for unfairness. But to try to justify unfairness is self-contradicting twaddle at best, and amounts to saying it's ethically right or at least permissible to be unethical!

If logic, including ethical logic, means nothing to you (although it should), then at least do so because Jesus insisted we should be fair and generous to our enemies! And warned us, not-incidentally, what would happen if we insisted on being unfair and/or ungenerous to our enemies while relying on our Lord being merciful to us when we are enemies. (Hint: it has to do with us being handed over to the torturers. Or to the tormentors, for those Christians who like to think God isn't involved in "torturing" sinners against Him.)

BUT GOD ISN'T BEING FAIR TO US WHEN HE IS BEING MERCIFUL!--SO IT'S OKAY TO BE UNFAIR SOMETIMES!!

Especially when it comes time to be unmerciful? So unfairness is good whether being merciful or unmerciful!

RIGHT!--UH...

Again, this insistence on finding some way to justify unfairness, i.e. to justify the fulfillment of injustice as being just, is simply perverse. The only justification for injustice is the hope of bringing the person doing the injustice to do justice someday rather than removing any further opportunity for that person to do justice. And that involves justification of the person, not actually the justification of injustice in itself. Moreover, this leaves no room at all for someone to defend why they themselves are being unjust!

I'm sorry to say that Rob himself tends to fall into this category, too.

My only big complaint about this chapter, is that Rob promotes a common theological habit of talking about God "redefining fairness". And by this, he doesn't mean that sinners have an uncharitably unfair idea of fairness, or (more technically) that the standard of fairness is eternally the relationship of fair-togetherness between the persons of the Trinity but as sinners we rebel against fair-togetherness between persons and so we

substitute some notion of "justice" which has nothing intrinsically to do with fulfilling fair-togetherness between persons. {inhale!}

No, Rob explicitly means to say, and does say, "the father never set out to be fair in the first place. Grace and generosity aren't fair; that's their very essence. The father sees the younger brother's return as one more occasion to practice *unfairness*. The younger son doesn't deserve a party--that's the point of the party. That's how things work in the father's world. Profound unfairness."

This is something that plenty of Calvinistic and Arminianistic Christians can no doubt get behind and accept--although, being Calvs and Arms, they wouldn't accept it as far as universalism!

But speaking as an orthodox trinitarian theologian, I have to say that this is nothing other than a repudiation of the existence of the essential Trinity. It may be an accidental repudiation--obviously many Christians hold this position who not only affirm but teach the essential Trinity. (Which seems to include Rob Bell, by the way!) Nevertheless, to say that fairness, i.e. justice, is not related to grace and generosity, or worse are even antithetical to each other, is to say that the persons of the Trinity are not fair (just) to one another but only unfair.

Rob, very unfortunately, goes the full distance on this: the father never set out to be fair in the first place. (Yet the Father is eternally fair to the Son, and vice versa, and each to the Spirit and vice versa, if trinitarian theism is true.) Grace and generosity are by their very essence not fair. (Yet grace and generosity are the very essence of the eternally coherent accomplishment of fair-togetherness between the Persons.)

If the father really saw the younger son's return as one more occasion to practice unfairness between persons, then the father would fulfill non(un)-fair-togetherness between himself and his son: and reject his son! The son would be hopelessly condemned, the end, period; there would be no reconciliation between them. And the father would be a doer of non(un)-fair-togetherness: which in the Greek of the New Testament, {adikaiousunē} would be what we translate "un-righteousness" or "injustice".

I don't exactly blame Rob for this: by his own testimony he isn't a theologian and doesn't want to be, and even trinitarian Christian theologians (who of all people ought to know better) have commonly fallen into the worldwide and quite pagan notion that justice is only or primarily the successful application of power or authority, to get what one wants or at most to give what one wants to give--and no more than that. To such a mindset, the freely given joy (or {chara}) of God, what we translate as "grace", must be unjust! And so they clamor for the injustice of God, so long as the injustice benefits them

somehow. Let justice be done hopelessly over there on those people instead, if some justice must be done by God at all.

But while I don't blame Rob for following what almost everyone else does on this topic, even when they aren't universalists (and not a few universalists go the route of hoping for the final injustice of God), still it grieves me to see the notion being propagated, whether for hope or for hopelessness.

Aside from this, Rob's final chapter, or chapters rather, are filled with good things. But most of all there is an evangelical outreach to people, whether 'outside' the Church or nominally 'inside' it, to trust in God, the Father and the Son and the Spirit, for salvation, in this life and in the next. Starting now in this life, not waiting for the next. To trust God in caring so much for us that He will accept us, personally, despite our sins. (Although He will never accept our sins--those have to go! But in his own way, Rob teaches that, too.) To trust God that we do need saving, that none of us are strong to live (or even exist!) without God, much less to be good people without God. To trust that God is great enough and good enough to persistently love all people everywhere. To trust that Jesus came (as God, sent by God) to save us from our sins and from our wretchedness--not to save us from God (either Himself or the Father)! To trust that our beliefs now, matter: what the younger son believed made a difference in how he acted (very poorly!) toward his father and toward his brother; what the older son believed made a difference in how he acted (very poorly!) toward his father and toward his brother.

But what the father believed, and did, made even more difference.

Life has never been about just getting into some group or some place, but about thriving in God's world, both now and later.

"God is love, and love is a relationship. [...] And Jesus invites us *into* that relationship, the one at the center of the universe."

"PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS!"

Yes, it's the same personal relationship that Rob denied was in the Bible, back when he was being intentionally stupid so as not to allow his opponents any credit on a point. {wry grin} Laugh and then move on--but don't miss the point, which is greater and far more important than anything asinine done by Rob Bell, and which Rob Bell himself goes very far in affirming (beyond his occasional rhetorical cheating.)

Moreover: one of those greater and far more important points, in fact, despite what his own opponents (I have to say "unfairly") insist, is that refusing this invitation has consequences, now

and later, and those consequences can be very harsh, both now and later, and those consequences won't be ending but will only increase in severity so long as the invitation is refused.

Rob insists on affirming this, too. He refuses to insist on the hopelessness of God in that matter. And he refuses to propagate what he very cleverly and rightly calls the gospel of goats.

AS IN THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS?

That's my guess--although Rob doesn't bother to spell it out here for his readers. But those goats did have what Rob calls "only an entrance understanding" of heaven: it's only or primarily about getting in. They weren't primarily concerned about living the gospel of Jesus Christ, even at the throne of Christ in judgment, but challenged when they had ever not been serving Him!

Whereas the sheep (or the mature flock, rather, as the Greek term in context with the "baby-goats" would imply) had been living the gospel of Jesus Christ, even when they weren't expecting Jesus to be their judge and were surprised to learn they had even once ever served Him.

BUT THE SHEEP OR THE FLOCK OR WHATEVER DIDN'T EARN THEIR WAY INTO HEAVEN!

Nope; which is exemplified clearly by the fact that they weren't expecting their deeds to get them in!

It isn't about earning heaven, neither now nor later; it's about living heaven, now and later.

It's worth pointing out, although Rob doesn't (quite probably because he isn't aware), that the first thing those sheep are likely to do, who lived the gospel by visiting the least of Christ's flock who had been imprisoned and blinded and made thirsty by Christ--(the list refers back to punishments from YHWH upon rebels, especially rebel Israel, for their injustice and uncharity to others)--

is to go visit those baby goats, the least of Christ's flock, who are being put into prison and darkness where they will thirst for the living water!

WHA--!?!? BUT... BUT WE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO HOPE FOR THE GOATS!!!

Well, you can either be a sheep about that, or a goat, I guess. But don't say you weren't warned. {wry grin}

The sheep who have been saved by Christ, however, will keep on trying to live the gospel for those goats.

That's what good Christian evangelists do.

Rob doesn't exactly get into that, in regard to the sheep. But (despite what some of his opponents insist on insisting!) he clearly understands the evangelical principle:

"Witnessing, evangelizing, sharing your faith--when you realize that God has retold your story,"--and Rob doesn't mean in some merely subjective way, he means God creating a new reality a new history in us by leading us to righteousness and out of our sins--"you are free to passionately, urgently, compellingly tell the story because you've stepped into a whole new life and you're moved and inspired to share it. When your God is love," and Rob doesn't mean in some wishy-washy emotional way, but rather when we realize that the source of all reality is itself a loving personal relationship, "and you have experienced this love in flesh and blood, here and now" namely in the person of Jesus Christ as our only Lord and Savior, "then you are free from guilt and fear and the terrifying, haunting, ominous voice that whispers over your shoulder, 'You're not doing enough.' The voice that insists God is, in the end, a slave driver."

BUT--BUT WE'VE HEARD FROM PEOPLE WHO ASSURE US THIS IS TRUE THAT ROB BELL ONLY PREACHES A GOD WE CREATE IN OUR MINDS, A "GOD WE SHAPE" WHO THEN "SHAPES US"!!!

Some of his language on this topic is not very competent, I agree; one of my minor gripes is that he does seem to affirm that we ought to shape our God to be like this-and-that, instead of like the other. Which would be pure idolatry, regardless of what the shape of "our God" resulted in.

But anyone who latches onto this is not reading for context. At most, Rob has lapsed into popular post-modernistic language; but in context he means that we ought to shape our idea of God to correspond with God's real reality, so that God may then (more efficiently) shape us. And that's no different from what any Calvinistic or Arminianistic Christian theologian would say. Neither Calv nor Arm nor Kath should disagree with the concept that, "A distorted understanding of God, clung to with white knuckles and fierce determination, can leave a person outside the party, mad about a goat that was never gotten, without the thriving life Jesus insists is right here, all around us, all the time."

The younger son thinks his badness is his problem; and it's true, his badness has separated him from his father. But not from the love of his father. And in the full gospel (which the parable of the prodigal does not report, focusing instead on illustrating some particular details), the father doesn't only wait hopefully, his hope perhaps crushed finally, for his son to repent and come home. He goes out after the son to bring him

home, and even becomes the way and the road for the son to come home.

The older son thinks his goodness is to his credit!--and this is separating him from his father, too, even though in another way he is present with his father all the time. Starving in a pen of unclean dangerous animals, as a slave "joined" to an unloving master (and that "joining" probably refers to something a Jew, and most other people, would consider the height of disgust!--as well as an ironic punishment for how he spent his part of his father's fortune, just as ironic as starving now), it's easy to realize something ought to be done, even if one doesn't yet trust one's father to help.

Living among all the father's things, as the principle heir and administrator, living even with the father himself all the time?--that can lead to more subtle problems which are just as toxic if sin is in our heart. It's hard to realize something still needs healing and repentance.

Which I would say explains why the father throws out such people in other parables!--so that they will be like the prodigal son!

Our goodness, when we think of it as our goodness, or even when we think of it as God's goodness but it has no love for our brother (including for our prodigal brother), can and will be sin against the love of our Father. It doesn't separate us from our Father's love (despite how Rob somewhat clumsily puts it); that love cannot be earned, and it cannot be taken away.

But it does involve us separating ourselves, as much as we can, wherever we are, from our Father.

Our sins are not irrelevant (though again Rob somewhat clumsily says so), nor our good needs, but neither one affects the ultimate love of our Father, which is the Father's inherent self-existence: God's love simply is, because God, Who is love, simply is.

God forgives us, Father and Son (and Spirit, too, although Rob doesn't talk much about the Spirit), without us even asking for it, before we can be good enough or right enough, before we can believe the right things. "God isn't waiting for us to get it together, to clean up, shape up, get up--God has already done it."

"Jesus meets and redeems us in all the ways we have it together and in all the ways we don't, in all the times we proudly display for the world our goodness, greatness, and rightness, and in all of the ways we fall flat on our faces."

"Love is what God is,
"love is why Jesus came,
"and love is why he continues to come,
"year after year to person after person."

"Our invitation, the one that is offered to us with each and every breath, is to trust that we are loved and that a new word has been spoken [by God] about us, a new story [our new creation] is being told [by God, our creator] about us."

"I tell you that story [of Rob's own conversion] because I believe that the indestructible love of God is an unfolding, dynamic reality and that every single one of us is endlessly being invited to trust, accept, believe, embrace and experience it."

"Whatever you've been told about the end--
"the end of your life,
"the end of time,
"the end of the world--
"Jesus passionately urges us to live like the end is here,
"now,
"today."

"May you experience this vast,
"expansive, infinite, indestructible love
"that has been yours [by God's grace] all along.
"May you discover that this love is as wide
"as the sky and as small as the cracks in
"your heart no one else knows about.

"And may you know,
"deep in your bones,
"that love wins."

We think of the wandering ultra-sinful "son" as being "prodigal".

But "prodigal" means "to give away profusely, extravagantly."

It was the father, after all, who was and is prodigal to his sinful son (and to his sinful sons!)

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ,
today and for all the "todays" to come,
("for as long as it is called 'Today'")
that is truly and persistently and utterly

prodigal

And that prodigal gospel
is what Rob Bell preaches.

Amen. {smile}