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Volume XIV
Issue 334

“Love Wins”

IN “*LOVE WINS*” BY ROB BELL, LOVE DOESN'T WIN EVERYONE

by — George F. Howe

INTRODUCTION

Rob Bell's title “*Love Wins*”¹ (*LW*) is a clever inversion of Paul's famous words in I Corinthians 13:8, “*Love never fails*” (Greek: *ē agapē oude pote piptei*). There is a deep syllogistic statement that emerges when I Corinthians 13:8 is combined with I John 4:8 – **major premise** “*God is love,*” **minor premise** “*love never fails,*” **conclusion** “*God never fails.*” Yet we shall see that the author of *LW* ended up claiming that at least in some cases, God will not get what He wants.

In the year 2011, *LW* rapidly rocketed to a high position on Amazon's best-seller list. One reason for this ascent was that Bell gave an affirmative reply to a question that has haunted Christians for centuries: “Can lost people ever get saved after they die?” Bell's Bible-based “yes” is directly opposite to the dismal widespread prospect promoted by numerous preachers in various denominations, the troublesome idea that those who die “outside the faith” are expelled from God's presence, forever to face unending judgment.

One other factor leading to *LW*'s outstanding success may be that the author is the popular pastor at a large and rapidly-growing “emerging church,” which, although somewhat “liberal,” is nonetheless stationed at the edge of “evangelicalism,” the conservative core of Protestant Christianity. I suspect that if *LW* had been written by an avowed “liberal” or by a minister from a denomination known for its “theological diversity,” it would have found fewer readers and would not have raised quite so many eyebrows.

Bell, like many other talented preachers, has alluded to fascinating side topics and has used practical illustrations. For example, he carefully described a painting in his grandmother's house to illustrate how we often conceive of heaven as “somewhere else.” Many questions, such as the following, were raised: “What really is ‘conversion to Christ?’” “What is faith?” and “How can we be joyful in heaven if we will

never even see some of the people we loved here on earth?” Concerning distorted views of God, on page 9 Bell related an interesting approach he sometimes takes when talking with an atheist. First he says something like this to the nonbeliever “Tell me about the God in whom you don't believe.” After listening for some time, Bell then exclaims: “You know, I don't believe in **that** God either!”

SOME SUPERLATIVE FEATURES OF *LW*

I think this book's greatest strength is that it promotes the likelihood of salvation occurring after death. On this subject, Bell's position is somewhat similar to that of Dr. Billy Graham and the late Bishop J.A.T. Robinson (see Robinson's *In the End God*). Bell's endorsement of posthumous reconciliation is remarkable, because he is an evangelical. Perhaps *LW* will open the door for other evangelical pastors to abandon the teaching of Augustine and Calvin on this subject, the terrible proposition that hell will last forever. Reading *LW* may likewise lead many Christians of various persuasions to understand that “salvation after death” is not a “damnable heresy” but a “Bible-based reality.” This corrective hallmark of *LW*, by itself, makes the book worth every penny of its price.

Bell has shown that the ultimate reconciliation of people to God through Jesus Christ is supported by dozens of Bible passages, including such key free-standing texts as Romans 5:18-19, Colossians 1:20, Philippians 2:10-11, I John 2:2, and hosts of others from both the Old and New Testaments. These are the very Scripture sections which, ironically, are ignored, downplayed or “revised” by many evangelicals who themselves profess to believe that “**all scripture is God-breathed**”

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1. Bell, Rob. 2011. *Love Wins*. Harper One, New York, NY.

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**LOVE WINS** (continued from front page)

(II Timothy 3:16). Bell shows that various well-known theologians in church history, before and after Augustine, have championed the hope that God can and does reconcile lost dead people (page 107).

There are several Greek and Hebrew words that have been systematically mistreated in most English Bible versions, with the result that they end up fitting snugly with the everlasting torment view. Bell has exposed these underlying translation errors in a clear and readable genre. For example, he showed that the Greek word *aiōn* regularly refers to an “age,” having both a beginning and an end. It does not mean “forever” as so many Bibles have it wrongly translated. Its adjectival form, *aiōnion*, derives directly from it, and means “aeonian” or “related to an age.” *Aiōnion* in Greek does not mean “forever,” as is erroneously conveyed in most Scripture versions.

Bell shows that *gehenna* designates nothing more or less than the garbage dump southwest of Old Jerusalem, and that *tartarus* was a term borrowed by the apostle Peter from Greek mythology to signify a temporary judgment abyss. After demonstrating that these words, and the word *hadēs* too, have nothing to do with our usual concept of “hell,” Bell concluded by saying, “... and that’s that” (page 72), but in conjunction with all of this, *LW* still promoted the biblical notion that God will employ purifying judgments to cleanse mankind, an idea that is rejected by many liberal theologians who have altogether abandoned the reality of God’s indignation (see page 37). Eventually, however, justice and mercy will “hold hands” in the age to come (page 38), for God “... simply does not give up on the creation” (page 36).

Bell reports that people, who favorably discuss the belief that God will reconcile lost souls, are ostracized from the mainstream of evangelicalism. I have encountered such ostracism, and am pleased that Bell made the following balanced assessment concerning the censoring those who believe in total salvation: “To shun, censor, or ostracize someone for not holding this belief [everlasting hell] is to fail to extend grace to each other in a discussion that has had plenty of room for varied perspectives for hundreds of years” (page 111).

BELL’S PERSONAL OPINION

Bell does not espouse the full-blown “universalist” idea that God will ultimately reconcile all lost people (pages 115-117). Nonetheless, on many pages from 95 to 116 and elsewhere in *LW*, Bell supplies a complete and comprehensive overview of what “Biblical Universalists” teach, emphasizing the very Scriptures they use to support their views. Introducing this grand exposé of total salvation, Bell quoted I Timothy 2:4, after which he asked numerous rhetorical questions like, “Will God take care of us?” “Are we safe?” “Will all be feasting, as in Psalm 22?” “Will God get what God wants?” “Will all people be saved or will God not get what God wants?” (page 98).

Bell loaded his long exposition of “Christian Universalism” with Bible quotations showing that all people, all nations, every knee, every tongue, etc. will experience salvation. By using these, Bell was demonstrating that God does not fail, that He shows compassion to all, that His anger is short, that His favor lasts a lifetime, and that God is not helpless. The author asks, “Will all people get saved or will God not get what God wants?” (page 98). Once, Bell even pokes fun at the very idea that God would fail to save by jokingly suggesting that God might end up saying, “Well, I tried. I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure.” Will God shrug God-size shoulders and say, ‘You can’t always get what you want?’” (pages 102-103). The author displays the “total salvation” view with such pleasant objectivity that some reviewers of *LW* actually believe Bell himself to be a full-orbed “universalist.”

However Bell is not, and he looks at future events in a different manner than do the “universalists.” Bell believes God, based on His great love for mankind, has put the highest premium on human “free will.” If any person repents and believes on Jesus, that individual will, of course, be saved, whether now or “later.” On the other hand, Bell speculates that there will be some individuals who, in their head-strong rebellion against God, keep right on resisting His grace. In His great love, God will grant those people their desire – to remain permanently separated from Him for as long as they choose, presumably even forever. Bell’s view is not supported by the barrage of Scriptures he quotes. Those passages show instead that God’s punishments are remedial and temporary, drawing people to God, even as Saul of Tarsus was dragged into God’s presence while walking the Road to Damascus where he wanted to execute Christian families. Instead of getting what he wanted, Paul received what God wanted!

Dr. Mouw, the president of *Fuller Theological Seminary* where Bell undertook graduate study, has come to this same conclusion about Bell’s ideas. Mouw wrote on-line, that Bell had “... not crossed the theological bridge from evangelical orthodoxy into universalism ... Bell is calling us away from stingy orthodoxy to generous orthodoxy.” Mouw himself evidently holds a view that he calls “salvific generosity,” which is similar to the ideas of Billy Graham and certain others. Bell demonstrated that he is not a “universalist” in these remarks:

“God gives us what we want, and if that’s hell, we can have it” (page 72).

“Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God because of their choices?” (page 115).

“Now back to that original question: ‘Does God get what God wants?’ is a good question, an interesting question, an important question that gives us much to discuss. But there’s a better question, one we can answer, one that takes all of this speculation about the future ... and ►



brings it back to one absolute we can depend on in the midst of all this, which turns out to be another question. It's not 'Does God get what God wants?' but 'Do we get what we want?' And the answer to that is a resounding, affirmative, sure, and positive yes. Yes we get what we want. God is that loving" (page 116-117)!

"That's how love works ... It always leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins" (page 119).

Bell pens numerous other statements like these on pages 104, 115, and elsewhere, elevating human freedom to a location higher than God's irresistible grace. Bell elaborates extensively on the idea that God and love will both win only if God lets people choose and then gives them exactly what they themselves want. Bell's approach contradicts the biblical view presented earlier in *LW*, namely, that God's love expressed through Christ remedies people and enables them all finally to want what they ought to have – God Himself.

SOME CHANGES NEEDED

While *LW* has great value, it contains some peculiar problems and annoying shortcomings that ought to be modified if and when a second edition is produced. A book of this caliber should not go to press without an index, reference list, and/or a bibliography – and yet, *LW* has none of these. When verses of the Bible are cited or quoted in print, it is always customary to supply the verse numbers along with the book and chapter. Yet in most cases, Bell did not provide verse numbers, a troublesome omission prevailing throughout the whole book. Sometimes, as on page 7, the author cites and quotes another author without supplying the number of the page from which that quotation was taken. In dealing with this complex subject, Bell did not reveal the background

sources he used. There are many classic and current volumes about these themes, books that Bell might have mentioned. Doing so would have helped interested readers to pursue the topic further, and might have assisted them in understanding the ideological bases from which Bell has worked. As far as I can tell, Bell did not cite or quote any of the volumes that he later listed in the section entitled "Further Reading."

The terms "poem," "metaphor" and "story" received unwarranted usage in *LW*. On page 133, for example, Bell classifies the Genesis creation account as "a poem." Bible translators have put biblical poetry into the English poem format. They found no reason to do this with Genesis chapters 1 and 2, because those chapters are clearly prose, not poetry. Salvation through the blood of Christ should not be described as "... merely a metaphor," like Bell did on page 128. Rob Bell showed an unfounded propensity to designate many direct biblical statements as "metaphors" or simply "stories," a word that carries fictitious overtones, and even implies, whether intended or not, that the event being discussed is nothing more than a "story."

CONCLUSION

In my 27 years of studying salvation after death, I have seen no other book on this theme (with the possible exception of *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, by Robert Short) that experienced such wide circulation and popularity. May its wonderful message of God's love reach many more readers who need to know that God's judgments will come to a permanent end, and may its talented author learn that God wills all people to be saved, and that what God wills, will happen, always.



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What God Wills, Happens; What He Wills Not, Won't

by — George F. Howe

EVERY WANDERING LOST SHEEP WILL BE FOUND

What man of you having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the desert and go after the one having been lost, until he find it? (Luke 15:4).

This parable is a picture of God, Who wills to find every lost sheep and will accomplish it. It is fascinating that God not only seeks the sheep but continues until He finds it. Isaiah 29:24 reports that *"Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding."*

"Lost" comes from *apollymi*, a Greek verb which, means "to destroy," when applied to an inanimate object, but when referring to a living person, it can indicate "... to kill (by taking a life), cause to lose (especially a life); to die or perish" (*Goodrick and Kolenberger's Greek and Hebrew Dictionary (GK)*). So, the word means "lost" and it includes those lost sheep who are also "dead." Nothing in the parable or the rest of Scripture shuts off salvation after the hour of death. So the word "lost" actually encompasses *lost in death*. This parable supports the idea that God will someday redeem all such lost souls.

Luke 19:10 uses the same verb *apollymi* this way: *"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which had been lost."* The lost sheep in Luke 15:4 represents lost people, all of whom will be sought out, saved and reconciled to God. Paul knew that if only the lost among the living could be saved, then believers would be the most pitiable people on earth: *"If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men"* (I Corinthians 15:19). If the dead who are lost were permanently consigned to everlasting torment in hell, living with that knowledge of such austere punishment would make Christians the most miserable people on earth. Isaiah 49:6, however, proclaims that Christ is a light to all of the Gentiles, and that salvation is not limited just to Israel or to those who are alive: *"I will also make you a*

light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

ALL WILL BE HEADED UP UNDER ONE HEAD, JESUS CHRIST

... He purposed within Himself, when the times have reached fulfillment, to head up all under one head in Christ, both in the heavens and on the earth in Him (Ephesians 1:9-10).

The word "purposed" is the verb *protithēmi* which is found three times in the Greek New Testament, having been translated three ways in the NIV: "planned," "presented" and "purposed." When it was a human, like Paul in Romans 1:13, who did the planning, the outcome was uncertain. For example, Paul, speaking to the believers in Rome, wrote, *"... I planned [protithēmi] many times to come to you, but have been prevented from doing so until now ..."*; but when *protithēmi* was used about a plan of God, as in Romans 3:25 where it was used about Christ's death for the sins of the world, the outcome was quite certain: *"Whom God purposed [protithēmi] for a Propitiatory shelter, through faith in His blood ..."* God's plan to send Christ was carried out flawlessly.

In Ephesians 1:9, *protithēmi* ("purposed") was also used in its fixed sense about a plan of God. It was made doubly firm in that God's purposing to *"head up all under one head in Christ,"* arose out of His innermost being: *"He purposed within Himself."* Nothing could be more incontrovertible than God's developing a plan from His inner being to head up all on earth and heaven in Christ. Philippians 2:10 includes all *"under the earth,"* which covers the dead as well. The ultimate reconciliation of mankind is a "done deal," a *fait accompli*. There is no room in the Bible for the "everlasting hell" concept, because all will be included under Christ's blessed dominion.

ALL WILL BE WORKED OUT ACCORDING TO THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S WILL

*In Whom [Christ] our **lot** was also cast for an inheritance, **predestined** according to the **plan** of Him Who **works all** according to the **purpose** of His **will** (Ephesians 1:11).*

The “**lot**” of those who receive the faith of Christ is cast with Jesus for an inheritance. The believers have been predestined in keeping with the plan of Him Who works all according to the purpose of His will. Each of the bold-face words indicates certainty, and together they show an end result which is firmer than the Rock of Gibraltar!

When a “**lot**” is cast, an issue was permanently decided. The verb “**predestined**” (*proorizō*) means “decided beforehand” (GK). “**Plan**” is an accurate translation of the Greek noun *prothesis*. It indicates a fixed program of events. The inheritance which lies ahead is based on the plan of One who “**works all**” (Greek, *energōō*) according to the “**purpose**” (*boulen*) of His “**will**” (*the lēma*). These six bold-faced words in one verse emphasize the incontrovertible manner in which God works all according to His will. Whatever He wills is going to happen, and nothing can stand in its way, not even man’s “free will.” There is an unwavering resolve on God’s part seen in this verse. The final result is that all will transpire exactly as God has proposed, for believers and for all humanity as well.

GOD WILL BRING ALL MEN TO SALVATION AND TO FULL KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH

... For this is right and acceptable before God our Savior, Who wills [thēlo] all men to be

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saved, and to come to full knowledge of the truth (I Timothy 2:3-4).

In this verse, the verb *thelō* (“wills”) means that God exercises His immutable plan to save all people. There are several other verses in which *thelō* indicates absolute certainty. James 4:15, for example, says, “*Instead you ought to say ‘If The Lord wills [thelō], we will live and also do this or that.’*” One’s very life depends on the operation of God’s will. Using *thelō* in Acts 18:21, Paul had this to say when he left Ephesus: “*I will return to you again, if God wills [thelō] ...*” Paul understood the fixity of God’s plan in all matters. He knew that if it was not God’s design that he return to Ephesus, he would not.

One way to understand the firmness of *thelō* in I Timothy 2:4 is to determine what topic was under discussion. Previously (I Timothy 2:1) Paul had been encouraging Timothy to make petitions, prayers, thanksgiving, and intercessions for kings, others in authority, and for *all people*.

One result of such universal prayer would be the ability to lead quiet, holy, godly and productive lives (:2). Another result of broad-based prayer is that the believers will appreciate the fact that God is going to save *all people* and bring them to full knowledge of the truth. When believers pray broadly for people, they are getting “in step” with God Who wills and plans to save them *all*. Praying for *all people* helps Christians “get with the program” of God!

Some of the ways the NIV translators rendered *thelō* in the New Testament are: want(s)(ed), will(s), is willing, desire(s), would, wish(es), choose(s)(ing), longed, decided, delights, and determined. While the key meaning of *thelō* in the context of I Timothy 2:3-4 is “wills,” each of the other concepts contained in these English words sheds more light on God’s outlook on the great work of redeeming everyone. For example, reconciliation of all is something God really wants and wishes to accomplish; He *desires* to save *all men*. The Lord longed for such a comprehensive work to occur. He determined to do so – not grudgingly, but delighting in the task.

GOD’S WILL WILL TAKE PLACE ON EARTH, AS IT DOES IN HEAVEN

Thy kingdom come. Thy will [thelēma] be done, as in heaven, on earth also (Matthew 6:10).



This model prayer links directly to words in I Timothy 2:4, “God our Savior Who wills all men to be saved ...” A major part of God’s will is that all people experience salvation. So when God’s will (*thelēma* of Matthew 6:10) has been accomplished on earth, then the saving of all souls (*thelō* in I Timothy 2:4) will have likewise been completed! Whether realizing it or not, people who pray the Lord’s Prayer are thus actually asking God to save everyone.

JESUS PRAYED THAT THE FATHER’S WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED, NOT HIS OWN

Going forward a little, He [Christ] fell upon His face, offering prayer, and saying – “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me, – Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39).

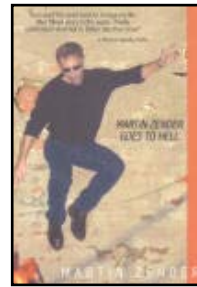
With His face to the ground, Christ uttered these requests to His Father. Although flinching at the horrible hours that lay ahead of Him, Christ asked for the Father’s will [*thelēma*] rather than His Own. Christ knew that the Father had sent Him to be the Savior of the world (I John 4:10), and He wanted to fulfill that grandiose plan, even knowing the great cost involved!

CHRIST IS GOING TO GATHER THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM UNDER HIS “WINGS”

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who were sent to her! How often I wanted [*thelō*] to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling [willed not – *thelō*] (Matthew 23:37).*

Whatever God “wills” [*thelō*] in Scripture will always come to pass, even if the event is delayed. In Matthew 23:37 and in Luke 13:34 Christ expressed a deep desire for close fellowship with Israel when He longingly made these remarks.

Although it may seem that the rebellious will of the people in Jerusalem overcame and outflanked Jesus’ desire, this is going to change. The fellowship that Christ wanted with Jerusalem is going to take place because “all Israel shall be saved ...” Romans 11:26. God intends to operate His rule of earth from Jerusalem, through Christ, using His beloved, redeemed Israelites to carry out the task.



Martin Zender Goes to Hell

by — Martin Zender

(#6494) 78 pages, PB
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The author embarks on a point-by-point refutation of the doctrine of eternal torment. In simple words he tackles all of the critical topics: Jesus’ threats to the Israelites, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the lake of fire, the Greek words translated “hell,” the Greek word commonly translated “eternal.”

WHAT GOD WILLS NOT TO HAPPEN, WILL INVARIABLY NOT OCCUR

*Thus it is not the will [*thelēma*] in front of your Father Who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matthew 18:14).*

Christ made it quite plain here and in the parallel text (Luke 15:4-7) that it is not in the Father’s agenda for even one of the “little ones” to perish. This very special verse comes right after Christ’s parable of the lost sheep. The words of Isaiah 14:26-27 apply here:

This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart Him? His hand is stretched out and who can turn it back?

WHAT GOD WILL DO AND WHAT HE WON’T

God wills (*boulomai*) no one to perish, and they won’t; God wills (*boulomai*) everyone to repent, and they will.

What God Won’t Do:

*The Lord is not tardy as to the promise, as some are deeming tardiness, but is patient because of you, not intending [Greek verb *boulomai*] any to perish ... (II Peter 3:9).*

This verse is not speaking about believers. It is not showing that God proceeds slowly so that all of the elect will have time to place faith in Christ before His return. Such an exegesis is clearly inaccurate. The passage points instead to the ultimate salvation of all people. ►

✎ The word “*intending*” is a good translation of the Greek verb *boulomai*. *Boulomai* appears 37 times in the New Testament, where the NIV adopted several words to translate it, including the following: want(ed)(ing), choose, chose, planned, willing, determined, etc., GK.

When *boulomai* deals with the intentions of human beings throughout Scripture, its outcome is somewhat problematic, entailing results that might or might not happen. This uncertain outcome is illustrated in the case of what Barnabas wanted to do: “*Barnabas also intended [boulomai] to take with them John, surnamed Mark ...*” (Acts 15:37). But a repeat missionary trip by these three men (Paul, Barnabas and John Mark) never occurred, even though it was desired (*boulomai*) by Barnabas, a fine Christian. Acts 15:37 is one of the many Scriptures demonstrating that what humans intend (*boulomai*) may or may not take place.

Boulomai has an assured completion when attached to God’s work, as is also seen in the different “gifts” conferred on various Christians by the Holy Spirit: “*All these are the work of one and the same Spirit and He gives them to each man, just as He determines [boulomai]*” (I Corinthians 12:11). This passage is an example of the many Scriptures proving that what God purposes (*boulomai*) to do always transpires. II Peter 3:9 is very similar in that it speaks of God’s will, not man’s. It proves that God wills (*boulomai*) that not any people perish. Surely none of them will!

What God Will Do:

... But [God is willing] all to make room for repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

This is one of the many Bible passages in which the Greek verb *boulomai* has been used in conjunction with God’s plan, not man’s. This is not a weak whim or a vague wish that may or may not be accomplished. It is instead an expression of God’s holy will, which certainly will be fulfilled. All people of all time will repent.

A GRAND FINALE

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