

Question: "What is ultimate reconciliation?"

Answer from GotQuestions.org: The concept of ultimate reconciliation—the idea that God will ultimately reconcile every soul at some point so that they willingly spend eternity with Him—once again caused quite a stir in the theological world with the March 2010 release of Emergent Church leader Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*. Decrying the historical theological position of a literal and eternal hell, Bell writes, “A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.”

What biblical support does Bell offer for ultimate reconciliation? Bell cites Matthew’s statement of Elijah coming who “will restore all things” ([Matthew 17:11](#)), Peter’s sermon in Acts 3 that states there will be a “period of restoration of all things” ([Acts 3:21](#)), and Paul’s statement about the Father using Christ to “reconcile all things to Himself” ([Colossians 1:20](#)). Bell also argues that God, being omnipotent, should be able to get what He wants, and the Bible clearly says that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” ([1 Timothy 2:4](#)). Bell implies that God would not be loving and great if He was unable or unwilling to save everyone: “How great is God? Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do, or kind of great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great” (*Love Wins*, pp. 97–99).

Is God going to ultimately save everyone as Bell asserts? Does the Bible teach an ultimate reconciliation of all created beings at some point to the Creator? These questions can be answered by first examining the debate from a historical perspective, then understanding the concepts of mercy and justice in God, and finally making a tour through Scripture to see what the Bible has to say on the subject.

Ultimate Reconciliation – A Look Back at History

Although the doctrine of ultimate reconciliation has been championed by a variety of individuals down through history, there are two that stand out. The first is Origen of Alexandria (185-254 A.D.). The African theologian, who took an allegorical approach to Scripture and was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, did not believe in the eternal suffering of sinners in hell. For Origen, all created beings, even demons and the devil, would eventually achieve salvation, no matter how long it took in the current life or in the life to come. He reasoned that because God’s love is so powerful, it will eventually soften even the hardest heart. This thought is echoed by Bell who says, “No one can resist God’s pursuit forever because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts” (p. 108).

Origen saw the church as the great “school of souls” in which erring pupils are instructed and disciplined, but for those who do not choose God in this life, they would continue

their ‘tutelage’ in the next through an atoning and sanctifying process of purging fire. Origen believed that hell cannot be permanent for any soul because God could not abandon any creature. Since God respects human freedom, the process of winning over His created beings may take a long time in some cases, but God’s love, Origen believed, will ultimately triumph. Or as Rob Bell puts it, love wins.

Origen’s restoration of all beings, known as *apokatastasis*, is the Greek word used in Acts 3:21 for ‘restoration, and can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who stated that “the beginning and end are common.” Origen’s belief in ultimate reconciliation was eventually refuted by Augustine and condemned in 543 A.D. in a council at Constantinople.

The second major personality in history contributing to the teaching of ultimate reconciliation was an Italian theologian named Laelius Socinus and his nephew Faustus, who lived in the 16th century. Together, they revived the fourth century heresy of Arianism—officially condemned at the council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.—and taught that the trinity was a false doctrine and that Christ was not God. In that sense, they were “Unitarian” in their teaching.

But Socinus went further and said that some of God’s attributes (e.g. His omniscience, immutability, etc.) were optional and not necessary, meaning He didn’t have to manifest them if He chose not to. Socinus claimed that God’s justice was optional, but His mercy is mandatory. In other words, God always had to be merciful, but He didn’t always have to be just toward offenses committed against Him. Therefore, the logic of Socinus progressed as follows: if God’s justice is optional, but His mercy is mandatory, and if God loves all the world and Christ died for everyone who would ever live, then all people will be saved by God. In this respect, Socinus and his nephew were Universalists.

Both Origen and Socinus’ teaching preceded Rob Bell by centuries, but the text contained in *Love Wins* echoes their conclusions perfectly. The question becomes, then, how can such a thing occur from a practical standpoint? How can all souls be reconciled to God? This is where Bell and his predecessors greatly err in their theology; they misunderstand and misconstrue the Scripture’s teachings on God’s mercy and His justice.

Ultimate Reconciliation – Understanding God’s Mercy and His Justice

It is important to understand that the concepts of mercy and justice are understood in a unique fashion in Christianity. In every other religion in the world that holds to the idea of a supreme deity, that deity’s mercy is always exercised at the expense of its justice. For example, in Islam, Allah may grant mercy to an individual, but it’s always done at the expense of his justice. In other words, the offender’s punishment that was properly due him/her is brushed aside so that mercy can be extended. Islam’s Allah, and every other deity in every other non-Christian religion of the world, lays aside the requirements of the moral law in order to be merciful. Most people would have a major complaint against any human judge who acted in such a fashion.

Christianity is different. In Christianity, God exercises His mercy *through* His justice.

The Christian doctrine of penal substitution states that sin and injustice were punished at the cross of Christ, and only because the penalty of sin was satisfied through Christ's sacrifice does God extend His mercy to undeserving sinners.

And while Christ did indeed die for sinners, He also died as a demonstration of God's righteousness. The Apostle Paul makes this clear when he says, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:24-26). In other words, Paul says that although God didn't immediately punish the sins of those who lived before Christ and extended mercy to them, He did not forget about justice. Instead, His righteousness (i.e. His justice) was demonstrated by Christ's death on the cross. So God's mercy was and is exercised through His justice.

While this teaching is beautiful and gives God glory, it can be misconstrued by some to mean that everyone will be saved through Christ's death on the cross. In addition to the scriptures mentioned by Bell in his book, some Universalists point to verses such as: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2), and: "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

The problem with such thinking is that there is enormous biblical evidence that leads in the opposite direction. Instead of echoing Origen, Socinus, and Bell's conclusion that everyone will eventually turn their heart toward God and be reconciled to Him, the Bible states conclusively that most will experience eternal separation from God and only few will be saved because not all will believe and embrace Christ as their savior.

Ultimate Reconciliation – The Biblical Case for Hell

While some theologians may struggle to ascertain whether Jesus believed in a literal hell, a number of atheists experience no such difficulty. The skeptic Bertrand Russell wrote, "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and it is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. . . . one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching. . . . I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty."

A plain reading of the text shows that Russell is right in his conclusion that Christ believed in hell. Consider Jesus' discourse found in Luke 16: "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he

lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us'" (Luke 16:19–26).

Bell believes that hell is a "period of pruning" and "an intense experience of correction" (pg. 91), and yet verse 26 of the passage above speaks of a chasm so great that none who are in hell may cross over. In other words, hell is permanent. Perhaps this is why Jesus spoke more about hell in the Gospel accounts than He did heaven.

Consider Jesus' other statements about eternal punishment and how the unsaved will experience God's wrath:

- "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13–14)
- "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'" (Matthew 7:22–23)
- "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day" (Matthew 11:23)
- "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness" (Matthew 13:40–41)
- "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:49–50)
- "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (Matthew 22:13)
- "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15)
- "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" (Matthew 23:33)
- "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;" (Matthew 25:41)
- "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:46)
- "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled,

than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43)

- "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:5)
- "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36)
- "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28-29)
- "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:11)

Notice that Revelation 2:11 has Jesus speaking of a "second death", which is important to remember. This term is used three other times in the book of Revelation to speak of the fate of those who are unbelievers:

- "Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6)
- "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14)
- "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

In Scripture, death denotes separation, oftentimes referring to the passage of life from a human body or the division of spiritual life from the soul of a person. In these verses, the author speaks to the fact that unbelievers are born once, but die twice; first they lose their physical life and then they lose their hope for eternal life with God.

There is no second chance, no matter how much Origen or Rob Bell wish it were otherwise. The writer of Hebrews plainly states, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Reconciling God's Mercy with the Biblical Case for Hell

In arguing for ultimate reconciliation, Rob Bell asserts that God would not be great, loving, or merciful if He assigned people to hell. But nowhere does God's justice ever factor into Bell's thinking. While God's justice is portrayed and is present throughout the entire Old and New Testament, what is absent in the Bible is Bell's belief in a post-mortem evangelistic campaign that eventually reconciles those dying without Christ in this life to God in the next life. This reversal of scriptural support proves to be Bell's theological Achilles' heel.

At the heart of ultimate reconciliation is the difficulty over reconciling God's mercy and the reality of hell is a lack of understanding of God's antecedent and consequent wills. God indeed antecedently desires all to be saved, but He consequently wills the sinner to experience His punishment. Or as Thomas Aquinas explained it: "Hence it may be said of

a just judge, that antecedently he wills all men to live; but consequently wills the murderer to be hanged. In the same way God antecedently wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts.”

Redefining hell as Origen and Bell do (a place of temporary correction before entering eternal life with God) does every person who hears and accepts their teaching an incalculable injustice, and in a very real sense makes them irrelevant as theologians and teachers. On an American troop ship, the soldiers crowded around their chaplain asking, “Do you believe in hell?” “I do not,” replied the chaplain. “Well, then, will you please resign, for if there is no hell, we do not need you, and if there is a hell, we do not wish to be led astray.”

Unlike false shepherds like Rob Bell, the Bible-believing Christian needs to heed the command given to Ezekiel, which applies to us today: “Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself” (Ezek. 3:17-19).

Charles Spurgeon paraphrased Ezekiel’s words this way: "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. If they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees. Let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for.”

Ultimate Reconciliation – Conclusion

It is sobering to remember that the first doctrine to be denied in Scripture is judgment. The Bible records Satan saying to Eve, “You surely will not die!” (Genesis 3:4). Unfortunately, many Universalists feel the same way and deny that an eternal separation from God is a reality for anyone who refuses Christ as their savior. But simply put, those who reject Jesus Christ in this life will have their request honored also in the next.

The doctrine of ultimate reconciliation or universalism may be appealing to human sensibilities, but it is simply wrong and unbiblical. Scripture teaches that beyond this life, there are no second chances. Instead, the Bible declares, “Today is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Love does indeed win for those who turn by faith to Christ in this life and embrace Him as Savior. Those who don’t and dismiss the concept of hell will find out eternity is an awfully long time to be wrong. As writer Os Guinness puts it, “For some, hell is simply a truth realized too late.”

Recommended Resource: Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World by Dennis L. Okholm & Timothy R. Phillips.