

Is There Anything Wrong With Rob Bell's Gospel?

Wednesday, 18 May 2011

J. Lee Grady - Fire In My Bones

The popular author's controversial book *Love Wins* celebrates God's love but drifts dangerously into Universalism.

I'm usually quick to speak my mind. But in the case of Rob Bell's controversial book *Love Wins*, I've withheld comment until now because (1) I don't think Christians should judge books before reading them; (2) the theological issues addressed require careful analysis; and (3) I have many young friends who are fans of Bell's books, and they may write me off if I don't treat him fairly.

So I'll begin with a compliment. Bell is a masterful writer whose prose is poetic. As pastor of the 7,000-member Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan, Bell has gained a following because of his casual style, his ultra-cool Nooma videos and the previous books he's released with Christian publisher Zondervan (especially *Velvet Elvis*).

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With *Love Wins*, he's taking his message mainstream. HarperCollins published it, and *Time* magazine featured a cover story in April about the firestorm Bell has triggered among conservative Christian leaders who have accused him of heresy. So what's all the fuss about?

Bell's core theme is that Christians have been too narrow in their view of God and His mercy. He argues that God loves people too much to banish them to hell. In the end, he says, after this life is over, everybody will find ultimate reconciliation in Christ. Bell claims this is what the Bible teaches, and he suggests that Christian theologians have promoted the idea for centuries.

He writes: "At the center of the Christian tradition ... have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God."

That sounds a lot like Universalism, the idea that all spiritual paths ultimately lead to heaven. But pinning the Universalist label on Bell isn't easy because he doesn't write authoritatively. He muses, hints, speculates and suggests his views, so not to offend. Rather than preach with conviction, he invites his readers to a "conversation." It feels friendly and non-confrontational.

Near the end of the book Bell sounds solidly evangelical when he emphasizes that people must receive the grace God has offered to us. But he sounds more like Oprah when he asks: "Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and claim to be a loving God?"

I can appreciate Bell's desire to distance himself from the mean-spirited side of American fundamentalism. Young people today are horrified (so am I) by self-righteous, Bible-toting believers who burn Qurans or spew hatred toward immigrants or homosexuals. Bell despises the "turn or burn" attitude that has made Christians look judgmental. He also believes we've trivialized salvation by turning conversion into a formulaic prayer, and by focusing the Christian life on the idea of "getting into heaven." I agree with him on those points.

But Bell is also guilty of trivializing salvation. He writes about an ooey-goey God of love but leaves out God's justice and holiness. His gospel, at times, sounds squishy and spineless. You can't correct the abuses of fundamentalism by disregarding the severe side of God's nature. You can't bring balance by swinging the pendulum too far the other way.

Because of Bell's popularity, Love Wins could steer the American church into dangerous waters. You can ignore the book if you want, but you can't ignore the fact that younger Christians are turned off by certain attitudes in the church, and they need solid answers. We must address the key doctrinal issues that Bell raises:

1. The reality of hell. Bell downplays Scriptural support for the existence of hell while admitting that Jesus talked about it more than anyone in the New Testament. At times he suggests that hell is just a state of mind, or maybe a manifestation of evil on earth. He also questions whether God would send anyone to hell since He's so forgiving.

Yet when the apostle Paul preached the gospel he warned of "the judgment to come" (Acts 24:25, NASB). The essence of the gospel is that Jesus came to save us from eternal separation from God. Don't we still believe this?

2. The exclusivity of Christianity. Bell makes a strong case that Jesus died to reconcile all people to God, but then he suggests that not everyone will realize it was Jesus they were praying to. The inference is that Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists will show up in heaven since they were responding to a divine impulse they didn't understand.

If that's true, why did Jesus Himself say the road to salvation was exclusively narrow and the road to destruction was wide? (see Matt. 7:13-14). Why did He command us to take the message of salvation to the nations? Why did the early apostles preach that salvation was only in His name? Were they narrow-minded fundamentalists too?

3. The necessity of evangelism. Bell comes close to ridiculing Christians who share their faith, and he wonders if it's really necessary for missionaries to share the gospel abroad. He asks: "If our salvation ... is dependent on others bringing the message to us--teaching us, showing us--what happens if they don't do their part? What if the missionary gets a flat tire?"

I'm sure Bell gets laughs when he repeats that line in a sermon. But it's really not funny. He's suggesting that there's no urgency about preaching the gospel, and that lives aren't at stake when we ignore our responsibility to evangelize. Tell that to the apostle Paul, who wasn't laughing when he said he felt an overwhelming obligation to preach so he could save sinners (see Rom. 1:14).

Bell says he asked Jesus into his heart when he was a child, so I'm treating him as a brother in Christ. I'm not picking a fight with him. But I can't endorse Love Wins. The doctrines of heaven, hell, salvation and damnation are too serious to be treated haphazardly. May the Lord help us to reclaim a truly New Testament gospel in an hour of spiritual compromise.

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