

Love Wins: Rob Bell Is *Partially* Right

Rob Bell is another in a long list of pastors, theologians and Christian writers who have defaulted to the love motif for resolving what he considers the perceived injustices of the God of the Bible; that is, the God of love who allows humans to suffer eternally in hell.

Most notable in this list of Christian writers is the late Joseph Fletcher, an Episcopal theologian whose controversial book, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, published in 1966, opened the door to social as well as Christian ethical relativism. Fletcher, unfortunately, was only partially right. While attempting to validate biblical love as the means by which all moral and ethical decisions should be based, he ignored other important precepts of biblical truth. The primary flaw in Fletcher's argument was that he failed to define biblical love, other than attaching the Greek meaning of the word *agape*. Biblical love, even *agape* love, requires biblical definition within the context of biblical revelation, and biblical love can only be defined by biblical truth. Without absolute truth, love cannot be absolutely defined. As in the case of so many Christian writers who default to the love motif for answering perceived biblical inconsistencies, making love the exclusive fallback position almost always sacrifices biblical truth in the process. The irony is that in doing so, these Christian writers bring themselves down to the level of humanists, philosophers, philanthropists, song writers, celebrities and mystics whose mantra is "What the world needs now is love, sweet love," and promote love as the solution to all the world's ills.

Bell, a preeminent figure in the Emergent Church movement, has unwittingly brought himself down to that mantra in his recently published, best-selling book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (HarperCollins, 2011). The reason he has lowered himself is simple: as is the case with almost all Emergent Church leaders, truth, even biblical truth, is relative and subject to interpretation. There is no such thing as absolute truth, and any assertion that the Bible is the source of absolute truth is false and cannot be substantiated in either a traditional or scientific way. All supposed biblical truths (e.g., doctrines) should be approached through "conversation" rather than conviction. Consequently, the most relevant approach to the Bible is to *raise* questions rather than *answer* them. And thus, Rob Bell raises questions—lots of questions—about heaven and hell.

Bell's book can basically be divided into three sections. The purpose of the first section is to raise questions about what Christians have traditionally regarded as truth, in this case, heaven and hell. The first chapter alone, *What About the Flat Tire?* contains 74 sentences ending with a question mark, and the most prevalent statements are, "...but that raises another question," "This raises another, far more disturbing question," and "Which raises another question" (p. 9).

Questioning basic tenets of biblical interpretation is Bell's way of donning his clerical "shock collar"; that is, wooing his followers by means of shocking assertions, a common tactic employed by the media to grab viewers' attention and pique interest. Don't touch that remote! Section two is coming.

The second part of Bell's book is an attempt to answer some of the questions raised in the first section, first addressing traditional beliefs concerning heaven, and then turning his attention to the harder of the two issues, hell.

Regarding heaven, Bell asserts that Christians should focus on the here and now rather than put all their eggs in the basket of future expectations after death. (Of course, he is writing to an affluent, pampered and narcissistic Y-Generation listeners, rather than Christians throughout the world who are being imprisoned, tortured and murdered in the name of Jesus. It's doubtful this book will be translated into Farsi.) Bell also asserts that we may not really know "who will be there and who won't be there"; that our preconceived notions of who's in and who's out may not be consistent with what the Bible actually teaches; that to dogmatically assess who really is in heaven and who is not, is insensitive and unloving. Surprisingly, on both counts, especially regarding the presentation of the gospel, Bell is partially right and provides some justifiable examples.

Unfortunately, because Bell has passed on traditional sound hermeneutics as no longer relevant, he doesn't even realize what he has stumbled upon. It's one thing to have a theology about who's going to heaven and who isn't, and it is quite another in terms of how that theology is presented today. It *can* be presented in an insensitive and unloving way. Additionally, Bell suggests that the true measure of who gets into heaven and who doesn't is based on *results* of one's faith and how that plays out in relationships, rather than simply saying a sinner's prayer and going about our merry nominal Christian way. But this assertion is harder to prove by someone who looks askew at Scripture, and it's no wonder Bell avoids quoting absolute biblical teachings such as 1 John 5:12: "*He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life*" (NASB). (I know, what does "has" mean?)

Regarding hell, Bell has a much more difficult time. The very notion of a loving God sending people to an eternal hell is inconceivable. To blunt the emotional trauma of attempting to reconcile the two, Bell resorts to two arguments: (1) the here-and-now argument; that is, hell is primarily here, now, and (2) if God allowed humans to suffer eternally in hell, he will have failed His creation (chapter 4, *Does God Get What God Wants?*) Bell believes in a literal hell, but it's the hell on earth that we should be concerned about. (When Bell was asked in a recent TV interview whether or not he believed in hell, he claimed that he did. Unfortunately, the interviewer failed to ask Bell for specifics.) Although Bell affirms that there is a "later" hell, this hell is reserved primarily for the devil and his minions.

Here again, Bell must resort to some rather creative hermeneutics to support his assertions that a loving God could not logically allow a human being to suffer in hell, and uses rather dramatic language to make his point: for those who don't accept "the right way...God (has) no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell.... A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony" (p. 173).

I feel for Rob Bell. The specter of eternal torment is as ugly as it gets. And, depending on your definition of love and a God who loves, one could easily come to the conclusion that hell and a loving God are incompatible and irreconcilable. Seeking a way out of the dilemma has resulted in doctrines of Purgatory, universalism, or the out and out rejection of Christianity altogether. The problem, however, is that the concept of a loving God and a future hell are incompatible *only* if one strays from solid biblical hermeneutics, strict adherence to the Word of God, and the view that the Scriptures present absolute truth. While it is true God does not reveal everything to mankind, God reveals *enough*; enough to believe that a loving God *is* compatible with a future hell. If it were not so, Jesus would have told us so, and told us emphatically. The reality of a future hell should make us all the more urgent evangelists.

But this brings us to the third section of Bell's book. The last two chapters involve a plea, and a justifiable plea at that. Bell's plea is that when the Christian message is presented, the emphasis should be on God's love rather than on the consequences of failing to believe and the prospect of eternal punishment. Consider Bell's audience. Up until the 90s—that is, until the post-Christian era—America had as its moral and ethical foundation a Judeo-Christian base. Even into the 70s, people could be convicted of sin because there was an underlying knowledge of biblical right and wrong. The fear of judgment actually worked, as attested to by the thousands upon thousands who committed their lives to Christ at Billy Graham Crusades. Except in the Bible Belt, that approach to presenting Christ is not as effective today because, with the erosion of the Judeo-Christian ethic, there is no underlying social guilt. There is, however, still a sense that "love wins," and upon that premise, God's incredible love is probably the most relevant message for presenting the gospel.

Bell's sincere plea that God's message of love be the primary emphasis of evangelism and the hallmark of the gospel is what makes his book partially right. His confusion over hell and who gets into heaven, is unfortunate. It is birthed by sincere concern for others, but when coupled with an unwillingness to take the Bible at face value, unpleasant biblical truths are hard to swallow and seemingly incompatible.

But Bell is partially right: the truth of the matter is that love does win, but it's the biblical definition of love that wins souls; the human definition of love wins only readers.

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