

A Squishy Gospel

I've withheld comment until now about author Rob Bell's controversial book *Love Wins* because I don't think Christians should judge books before reading them. But I can't bite my lip any longer. Something needs to be said.

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.

Bell sounds solidly evangelical when he emphasizes that people must receive the grace God has offered. But he sounds Oprahesque 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 by 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 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.

Because of Bell’s popularity, *Love Wins* could steer the American church into dangerous waters. You can ignore the book, but you can’t ignore the fact that the Universalist doctrine appeals to younger Christians who are turned off by self-righteous attitudes in the church. We must address the key doctrinal issues that Bell raises:

1. The reality of hell. Bell downplays Scriptural support for the existence of hell. He also questions whether God would send anyone to hell since He’s so forgiving. Yet the essence of the gospel is that Jesus came to save us from eternal separation from God. Do 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).

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. Yet the Bible says lives are at stake if we ignore our

responsibility to evangelize.

People still need salvation, and we don't need to soften the message or apologize for it. The doctrines of heaven, hell, salvation and damnation are too serious to be treated haphazardly. May the Lord help us reclaim a truly New Testament gospel in this hour of spiritual compromise.

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