

Rob Bell's Recipe for Spiritual Disaster

In the midst of his announcement on Sunday that he now supports same-sex marriage, **Rob Bell** warned American evangelicals to “adapt or die.” His counsel, intended to be helpful, is actually a guaranteed formula for failure and a proven recipe for disaster. In fact, the only way for us to make a lasting impact on the culture and maintain a relevant witness to society is to do the opposite of what Bell advised.

Over the last few years Bell, a best-selling author and former megachurch pastor, has steadily distanced himself from the mainstream **evangelical community**. Known for asking provocative questions and challenging the status quo, he amassed a large following that has been drawn to his non-dogmatic approach—an approach I call a “celebration of ambiguity.”

To paraphrase this approach: Rather than the leader saying, “This is the way. It is proven and sure. Follow me,” the leader now says, “Who am I to know? How can anyone be sure? Isn’t it narrow and small-minded of us to be so inflexible and dogmatic?”

Somehow, young people in particular have rallied around this mindset, a mindset that has already lost its way before it even starts. Yet losing one’s way is celebrated, too: “The destination is not important,” we are told. “It’s the journey that matters!”

Personally, I would rather enjoy a terrible journey to heaven than a lovely journey to hell. Speaking of which, Bell’s 2011 *New York Times* best-seller *Love Wins* represented another departure from the evangelical mainstream. In the book, Bell suggested that, to a great extent, hell is here and now, and in the end, everybody will make it into God’s

heavenly kingdom.

Last year, speaking at a church gathering in California, Bell stated his belief that you could be a practicing homosexual and a follower of Jesus at the same time, encouraging his listeners to take their focus off of gay-related issues and to look instead at the “truly *big* problems in our world; that I believe Jesus would [have] us to band together, and tackle together.”

In light of this, it was hardly a surprise when he announced on Sunday during a Q&A session: “I am for marriage. I am for fidelity. I am for love, whether it’s a man and woman, a woman and a woman, a man and a man. I think the ship has sailed and I think the church needs ... this is the world we are living in and we need to affirm people wherever they are.”

Of course, Bell is right that, to an extent, “the ship has sailed,” and affirming same-sex “marriage” is now the politically “in” thing to do, as witnessed by the recent statements of former President Bill Clinton, Sen. Rob Portman and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

But what in the world does that have to do with right and wrong? If society has lost its moral bearings, should the church lose its moral bearings as well? Shouldn’t we rather swim against the tide of popular opinion and call the world to turn around?

And since when do we drag down the teachings of Jesus, which were marked by divine authority and absoluteness, to meet the standard of “the world we are living in?” Aren’t we supposed to challenge the world to live up to the standards of the Lord?

Bell said on Sunday, “I think we are witnessing the death of a particular subculture that doesn’t work. I think there is a very narrow, politically intertwined, culturally ghettoized,

evangelical subculture that was told, 'We're gonna change the thing.' and they haven't. And they actually have turned away lots of people. And I think that when you're in a part of a subculture that is dying, you make a lot more noise because it's very painful. You sort of die or you adapt."

Without a doubt, Bell is right that in many ways the evangelical church has fallen out of touch with the nation, and to the extent we can be culturally sensitive and "understand the times" (see 1 Chr. 12:32), we make an impact. On the other hand, Bell is completely wrong when he warns, "You sort of die or you adapt."

In the days of the Maccabees, did the Jewish people survive the onslaught of Hellenism by adapting to paganism, with all its worldly appeal, or did they overcome by resisting at any cost, thereby demonstrating the power of their convictions? Did the early church survive the polytheism of Rome by bowing to the emperor, or did they overcome by refusing to compromise, even to the point of death, thereby pointing to a better life?

Remarkably, on Sunday, when the forum moderator tried to get Bell to take a firm position as to whether Christians 'know' the truth in some ultimate sense, Bell took the discussion in a completely different direction.

But that is the very heart of the problem. Bell's celebration of ambiguity has become a dogmatism of uncertainty, and it is because of his lack of spiritual absolutes that he has wandered off the path, leading a generation in his wake.

The truth is that 100 years from now, either in this world or the world to come, history will record that those who conformed their beliefs to the culture were nothing more than a passing curiosity, while those who refused to compromise truth will be regarded as the spiritual heroes and torchbearers.

In the words of Charles Spurgeon, "Character is always lost when a high ideal is sacrificed on the altar of conformity and popularity."

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