

The Problem With Rob Bell's Gospel

When former evangelical pastor Rob Bell published his bombshell book *Love Wins* in 2011, his Michigan megachurch reportedly lost 3,000 members. They scattered quickly because Bell questioned the existence of a literal hell. His point was that Christians need to develop a nicer message with a lot less judgment. But his solution was to throw out 2,000 years of Christian theological tradition.

Then last month, Bell made a more stunning announcement from a pulpit in California. He told people gathered at Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal church in San Francisco, that he supports same-sex marriage. His primary reason, he said, was that culture has changed and we need to adapt.

"I am for fidelity," Bell said. "I am for love, whether it's a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, a man and a man ... This is the world that we are living in, and we need to affirm people wherever they are."

I can appreciate Bell's desire to affirm people. And I agree that some Christians come off sounding unbelievably harsh when we talk about homosexuality. But Bell didn't have anything affirming to say to the evangelical Christians who were his support base during the early years of his ministry. He trashed us. And he was judgmental about it.

Describing evangelicals, Bell predicted our doom in his March 17 remarks: "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."

If Bell wants to come off as affirming and non-judgmental, he should use kinder words when describing a group of Christians who make up an estimated 30 percent of the U.S. population. Bell seems to be saying: *"I'm right, and you evangelicals are irrelevant."* He's ready to officiate at our funeral.

In response, I offer three points:

1. It's actually OK to be narrow. Bell accuses us of being narrow. But wasn't it Jesus who told us the way to salvation is narrow? He said: "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" (Matt. 7:13, NASB). Besides the fact that Jesus refers to hell in that passage, He also says we have to be narrow to avoid it.

Righteousness requires limitations. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for being judgmental on one hand, yet He drew lines and demanded holiness on the other. We can't be like Jesus, nor can we demonstrate true love, if we affirm every lifestyle and embrace every behavior.

2. Our subculture is not dying. The denominations that are losing the most members today are actually the mainline groups that have lost their commitment to the Bible. I'm in a different church almost every week in this country (mostly charismatic or Pentecostal), and I see vibrant faith, growing congregations and the emergence of multiethnic leaders.

(And speaking of multiethnic, some of the most conservative Christians in America are immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Does Bell think they are irrelevant? They are the real future of our movement. Bell is out of touch if he thinks evangelicalism is just a bunch of old, white, Republican guys.)

3. We do need to change our attitude. I will agree with Bell that there is a segment of evangelicalism that is too politicized. We misrepresent Jesus when we label Him a

Republican or a Democrat. He is neither. And we alienate people from Jesus when all we do is pontificate about what we are against.

It is very possible that gay marriage will become the law of the land in this country, just as the Supreme Court sanctioned abortion in 1973. Just because our government legalized the killing of an unborn baby does not mean I have to support that choice personally. But I do have to show love and extend Christ's forgiveness to a woman who has aborted her child. Yelling at her or condemning her will not bring her to faith in Jesus.

In the same way, we are called to show love and respect to gay people. I don't have to agree with a person's lifestyle to love them. Jesus showed amazing compassion to the woman caught in adultery—and He rebuked the religious bullies who wanted to stone her. But when they put down their rocks and walked away, He told her: "I do not condemn you, either. Go. *From now on sin no more*" (John 8:11, emphasis added).

Jesus was totally comfortable using the word *sin* when He showed love to a person. And that's the part of Jesus' gospel that Rob Bell ignores.

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