

Book Review: *Love Wins*

Rob Bell's new book *Love Wins* is very good. I believe it could have been a great book, but more on that in a moment.

The first very good aspect of Bell's book is that he asks excellent questions. "What happens to a 15 year-old atheist who dies in a car wreck?" "Can someone dogmatically say that Gandhi is in hell?" "Did Jesus come to save us from God?" He is asking all the right questions: the questions the world is asking – both implicitly and explicitly – of modern, American evangelical theology.

The second very good aspect of Bell's book is that he offers excellent, Bible-based answers to these questions. The book is filled with quotes from the Scriptures and he interprets these verses correctly, in a Christ-centered way.

The net result is a very good book. A book that raises profound questions that most Christians in America need to think about and a book that points its readers to answers rooted in the Biblical witness of who God is.

Rob Bell is clearly smarter than me and a more gifted writer and a far more accomplished minister than me. So I do hesitate to offer any critique of his work – after all, who am I? Yet, as Paul said, "I think that I too have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 7:40.) So I will critique.

What prevents this book from being great is that it is not Trinitarian. I don't mean that Rob Bell doesn't believe in the Trinity. I'm sure he does. What I mean is that he doesn't read the Bible, think, or argue based on God's nature as the Father who loves the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. He talks extensively about God being love, and about God's love winning in the end, but he never defines that love the way the Bible defines it: as first and foremost the love of the Father for the Son, a love in which humanity is now adopted (John 14:20-21; Eph. 1:5.)

So, for example, Bell talks constantly about God and about Jesus. Almost all of his discussion of Jesus is about what Jesus taught about God. And almost all of his discussion about God is about what God is like and how God acts. He offers a brief discussion of the incarnation on pp. 144-150 that makes it clear that he believes that Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh.

But in all this he never makes it clear that Jesus is the Son of the Father who knows the Father, reveals the Father, and has adopted humanity into the life he shares with the Father. In fact, Bell quotes the preeminent Biblical verse on adoption (Eph. 1:5) and literally erases the phrase about adoption by using an ellipsis (see pg. 148.)

So what? Does everyone have to talk about the gospel the way I do in order for me to approve of their work? No, of course they don't. That's why I say this is a very good book. Bell reaches Trinitarian conclusions without reference to the Trinity. He never talks about

God the Father (though he does make some allusions to the fatherhood of God and exegetes the parable of the Prodigal Son in a way that makes it clear he sees the father in the story as an image of God.) He never talks about the Son in the flesh as the man Jesus Christ as the revelation of the Father. And he never talks about the Holy Spirit. Yet he still reaches many conclusions that students of Trinitarian theology will recognize.

The reason I critique this book for not being Trinitarian is because that is what stops it from being a great book. With the giftedness and national stature that Bell has he could have written a book that would have blown people away. Instead he wrote a book that is a great conversation starter but doesn't quite get its readers to the place they need to be.

Take his use of Scripture as another example. He quotes the Bible frequently and he appeals at several critical points to arguments based on the original languages or the culture of the time in which the Bible was written. These are good arguments but they have some inherent weaknesses. The context of a culture that we study from a distance of over 2,000 years can be debated. Scriptures can be twisted, turned, and re-interpreted. The core problems that American Christianity is struggling with are not that we don't know what the Bible says or that we haven't all read the same commentaries on cultural context and language that Bell has read.

The problem is that we all have access to all the same data that Bell uses but we are not all reading and interpreting this data through the lens of the Trinity. As Baxter Kruger says, we are reading with the wrong glasses on. By the grace of the Holy Spirit Rob Bell manages to reach good conclusions even while wearing inadequate glasses, but I believe he leaves many of his conclusions dangerously vulnerable to attack and debate because they are not rooted in the logic of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Implicit in Bell's writing is the assumption that the story of God in the Bible is the underlying logic of existence. But it's not. The underlying logic of existence is the love of the Father for the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. The story of God in the Bible points us to Jesus who reveals this love of the Father and, in the grace of the Holy Spirit, shows us our place with himself in the life of the Father's love. The ultimate and strongest argument for Bell's conclusions is not what the Bible says but rather who the Bible points us to: the Father, Son, and Spirit. Bell never roots his argument in this foundational, Trinitarian logic of existence.

From this perspective the quoting of Bible verses or the parsing of Greek words should be a supplement to the argument, not the whole basis of the argument as it is in *Love Wins*. When we argue for God's passionate love, the purgative nature of hell, and the union of humanity in Christ from the basis of the Trinity our argument is given a spine of steel that is not easily broken. When we argue based on the cultural context in which Jesus lived and the meaning of Greek words – as Bell does – our argument remains flabby and easily sucker punched.

What Rob Bell has been reading, and who has influenced his thinking, comes through in this book. He has clearly read Robert Capon, for example, and even references Capon's *The*

Mystery of Christ in a suggested reading list at the end. Conspicuously absent are some of the greats of Christian History: Irenaeus of Lyon, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Karl Barth, T.F. Torrance, and Baxter Kruger just to name a few. He does make passing reference to some of the Church Fathers on pg. 107 but I'm not convinced he has read very deeply in Patristic theology.

Maybe I'm wrong, but my own experience – and my experience reading theologians like Barth and Torrance – tells me that when you have drunk deeply from the well of the Fathers (or from the water buckets of those who have, like Kruger) you can no longer just talk about “God and Jesus” as Bell does. Something changes inside you. Your mind is baptized into the Triune Life in such a way that it dyes the very color of your thinking. You no longer think, as Bell does, about what God is like and what Jesus said about God. You think of the glorious riches of the Father poured out on humanity through the flesh and blood of his Son Jesus Christ and enjoyed by all in the love of the Holy Spirit.

It was this joyful reveling in the Triune Life that I was hoping against hope that I might encounter in this book and it was this that was everywhere implicit but nowhere plainly and simply talked about in this book. It's for that minor oversight – completely ignoring the Triune Life of God – that I say this very good book is not the great book that it could have been.

As a very good book I think it will serve a very good purpose. It will get people talking about real issues that really need to be talked about. And in that regard it will serve as a beginning point for the return to Trinitarian theology that must take place in American Christianity. But we are still waiting for the great book on the subject of “Love Wins.”

~ Jonathan Stepp