

Rob Bell's "The Gods Are Not Angry" Review

I must admit that most of my exposure to the teaching of the Emergent Church has been limited to a few brushes with Christian student organizations on college campuses while doing open-air preaching. However, the predominant philosophy of the movement, unbelieving post-modernism, is as common as American pennies to anyone who has done any amount of evangelism amongst college aged students.

When Rob Bell came to Dallas, TX for a stop on his "The Gods Are Not Angry" tour, we went primarily for the purpose of passing out Gospel tracts after the event let out. God had other plans and we ended up getting free tickets to the event.

Bell's presentation was very basic in terms of the medium that he uses to communicate. The stage was empty with the exception of a large model of an altar. While Bell does not use a half hour diatribe with three points beginning with the letter "p" to communicate his position (something he criticizes in his presentation), the listener has to be prepared for a two hour diatribe with no point at all.

The crowd that came out to hear Bell was as entertaining as Bell himself. Apparently the Emergent movement is not beyond that bane of popular American Christianity: idol worship. It was amazing to see so many of the men dressed like Bell, many even sporting the same dark rimmed glasses.

Bell's thesis follows this line of reasoning: 1) mankind has offered sacrifices to various conceptions of God because he must in order to keep receiving blessings (harvest, children, etc.) or because he has offended God and must earn back the favor of whatever deity he or she is worshipping. 2) The sacrifice concept was developed in primitive "caveman-like" eras over lengthy periods of time, which assumes the accuracy of Darwinian evolution. 3) The story of redemptive history in the Bible is not about sacrifices dealing with the issue of sin, but showing that God's true character is not like that of the angry, vengeful and demanding pagan deities (he uses one of the feasts in Leviticus to make this point). 4) That Jesus Christ's sacrifice has done away with not only the Old Testament sacrificial system, but also all pagan sacrificial systems (through a poor misrepresentation of Hebrews). Thus, he comes to the conclusion that Christ died to prove to the human race that God is not angry with them, that He loves them pretty much as they are, and that there is no need to repent. This is what leads many critics of the movement to conclude that Bell and others are Universalists. 5) The effect of this brand of "Christianity" (using this term loosely) is that people who have been impacted by this message do good things for others.

The errors in Bell's "doctrine" are apparent to anyone who bothers to take the time to examine his teaching on even a cursory level. While sociologists may conclude that godless cultures instituted sacrificial systems as a lame attempt to deal with their guilt as well as an attempt to coerce deity to bless their work, the Bible does not teach anywhere that the sacrificial system of the true God was designed to correct the errors in popular pagan thinking. In fact, it does teach that these cultures developed these systems as a deviation and perversion of the truth. It teaches that they rebelled against the truth and in a manifestation of (gasp!) God's wrath, they became more and more degenerate (Romans 1:18-32). It teaches that their problem was sin, which is why the biblical sacrificial system was instituted in the first place, even as far back as Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21).

Bell's handling of the texts in Hebrews can be characterized as either: 1) theological revisionism or 2) woefully ignorant. In light of Bell's years in ministry and training, it's probably best to characterize the teaching as the former rather than the latter. To suggest that Hebrews 10 teaches that Christ's sacrifice had anything to do with pagan sacrificial systems is ludicrous. That text compares the sacrifices of Yom Kippur with Christ's perfect sacrifice and speaks of the superiority of Christ's work to that of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In order to come to the conclusion that Bell comes to, it is necessary to ignore both the immediate context of Hebrews 10 and the entire book of Hebrews. For a general exposition of Hebrews 10, click here: <http://www.countrysidebible.org/media/s1c1070916a.mp3>.

Bell mangled the definition of repentance, stating that repentance is not turning from sin. Rather, he says it is a "celebration" of life in Christ. He further stated that anyone who tells you that you need to repent is not talking about Christianity. If he is right, then John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), Peter (Acts 3:19), Paul (Acts 20:21) and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Matthew 4:17; 9:13) weren't preaching Christianity. In order to come to this conclusion, Bell has to ignore all of the Old and New Testament evidence that repentance is turning from sin and turning to Christ alone in faith. He has to ignore the Jewish conception of repentance (which was not lost on the Jewish believers of the early church) which was turning from sin to turn to God (Ezekiel 18).

So, to summarize, Bell has reduced the death of Christ to an act of God intended to demonstrate that God is not angry with us. There was no mention of Christ's substitutionary death for our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), a revision of repentance, and no mention of a need for true saving faith in Christ alone for salvation. In short, in two hours of diatribe, there was not a mention of the true Gospel and an elaborate, witty presentation of a false one.

After the event was over, we went outside of the theater to pass out tracts. We could do it confidently, knowing that we belonged there because the tracts gave the missing and accurate information. Whatever Rob Bell is teaching, it is not orthodox Christianity. If those in the "Emergent Conversation" are to have any hope, they will have to turn from their questioning of everything biblical and admit that the Bible has the answers.