

So What can We Say About Hell?

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In 2011, evangelical pastor Rob Bell wrote a book called “Love Wins.” It begins with a story about an art show at his church, where he had given a series of sermons about peacemaking. The church “invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling. But not everyone. Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the paper was written, ‘Reality check: he’s in hell!’”

Really? Gandhi in hell? How does this person know?

Bell states that the story of Jesus “is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.” If that is true, how can a loving God send anyone to hell? He concludes that since God’s love embraces all people, love truly and deeply wins.

The book caused a firestorm in the evangelical world. Many were horrified by the book, and denounced Bell online and in print as a heretic. They were absolutely determined to drive Bell out of his church and out of the evangelical world altogether.

How dare he teach that God loves everyone, regardless of any human boundary? How dare he teach this universalist theology? Has he forgotten that God sends unbelievers to hell, a place of eternal and conscious torment? Doesn’t he know that if we no longer believe in hell, people will do whatever they want? The controversy became a Time cover story.

Bell refutes their criticism: “It’s been clearly communicated that this belief (in hell as eternal, conscious torment) is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.”

You won’t be surprised that I agree with Bell. No one is excluded from the love of God, not in this life, and not in whatever follows this life. God loves everyone. Period. End of story.

We find it throughout the Bible. Indeed, the Bible’s most famous verse, John 3:16 emphasizes God’s love for all. It might even be summarized, “Love wins!” In case you haven’t memorized it, it reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

John’s gospel uses the Greek word “kosmos” for world, and everywhere else, it describes a world that is at enmity with God. A good example is found in John 17 as Jesus prays just before his crucifixion, “I have given them your word, and the kosmos has hated them because they do not belong to the kosmos, just as I do not belong to the kosmos. I am not asking you to take them out of the kosmos, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the kosmos, just as I do not belong to the kosmos.”

When we understand this, it gives John 3:16 a bit more punch: “For God so loved the God-hating world” Apparently, God really, really, really loves the world. The whole world. Every part of it. God’s love embraces even that part of the world which rejects God.

The sad truth, however, is that evangelical Christians tend to limit God’s love only to those “who believe in him.” They end up minimizing the power and force of God’s love for all the world, and hell becomes one of the keystones of their theology, while love is pushed way down to the bottom of their theological list.

We need to understand, however, that the theological concept of “hell” barely shows up in the Bible. It is almost entirely missing from the Old Testament, and only surfaces as a minor

concern in the New Testament. God's love, however, shows up all over the place in the Bible—God's love for all people, as well as our own response to God's love, which is to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The heart of Jesus' teaching is that Christian faith is about learning to love, learning to live in peace, learning to encourage and support others, learning to live in this world with grace and joy.

The threat of hell was only developed much later, in the Middle Ages. The church wished to control the lives of people, motivating them to avoid eternal punishment by doing "pious works," which included everything from donating money to build the Sistine Chapel to enlisting in countless Crusades.

Conservative Christians still use hell as a threat to try and control people. "If you don't believe the way I do, or behave the way I do, or honour my way of doing things, you'll end up in hell!" They claim to know the mind of God about who's in and who's out. They end up denying God's deep, all-inclusive love for all of creation.

We are living in a time when we urgently need to emphasize the power of love in the world. We need to learn how to live together in peace, to find ways in which we can live together with grace and hope. We need to learn how to build community and live with those who disagree with us without becoming disagreeable.

God's love provides a foundation for us to begin this urgent task of working together to build a society of peacemakers and lovers. Love is a more central theological concept in the Bible than hell ever was. If the church doesn't participate in this work, it fails to be the church of Christ. There is no limit to how far God's redemptive love can reach.