

A Biblical Critique of Rob Bell’s “The Gods Aren’t Angry” Tour

Before I get into my criticisms of Mr. Bell’s theology and teachings that he espouses in particular in his tour “The Gods Aren’t Angry,” I’d first like to clear up a few things so that my detractors have less ammunition with which to fire volleys of vitriol.

I harbor no ill will toward Rob Bell. He is a talented, charismatic speaker, and a superb storyteller. But if words mean anything, then Rob Bell has largely abandoned the Gospel. By his own words is he condemned as a false teacher — greatly deceived and deceiving many others and leading them astray.

My allegiance is to my God and Savior, the Lord Jesus, and to His word. If God has exalted His word even as high as His holy name (Psalm 138:2), how much more ought we to cling to it? If God has indeed spoken through the prophets and apostles, then what He has said is of paramount importance. I do not trust in the fabrications of men, but in the word of God. Yes, I am a *sola scriptura* kind of guy. My allegiance shall be given to no man, no organization, no philosophy – *nothing* and *no one* save my gracious Master.

I write this, dearly loved friends, with the hope that you will be noble-minded like the Bereans and search the scriptures to prove whether or not the things which I say are true. If I am to be judged positively or negatively for my criticism of Mr. Bell’s teachings, let it be on the basis of scripture. I write these things with the assumption that scripture is our sole and final authority. If this is unacceptable to your mind, then I wish to humbly suggest that this assessment will be of much less value to you, indeed perhaps even useless. But I digress.

If you believe strongly that I have unfairly represented Mr. Bell or that my motives are impure, I will be glad to clarify as circumstances reasonably allow. All scripture references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

Bell began our time together without fanfare or formal introduction. He went straightaway into his first story of a cave woman who notices connections between the celestial bodies, weather, and those things linked with her well-being (e.g. edible plants). He tells of a cave husband who likewise notices these connections while hunting. These hypothetical people somehow end up thinking that they somehow must appease the celestial being(s) in order to be prosperous. Nowhere in here are Adam and Eve mentioned. In fact, at no time were the first 11 chapters of Genesis even touched upon during the evening. I suppose that the accounts of Genesis 3, 6, 7, and 11 would be a bit antithetical to your point if your audience is supposed to conclude that God isn't angry.

Bell continued to explain how various ancient cultures created and worshiped various deities, rattling off a string of ancient gods and what they were worshiped for without missing a beat. Sacrifices to these gods were made in order to keep the forces happy and receive blessings. Along comes Abraham in Genesis 12, and God speaks directly to him.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Gen 12:1-3)

Bell tells us that up until this point, the gods were far from man and you never knew what they actually required in the way of sacrifices to keep them happy. But while this may have been true of the idols men worshiped, this is a result of man becoming idolatrous in his rebellion, not the result of evolutionarily developing the idea of pleasing the primal life forces as one might be strongly inclined to conclude from Rob's caveman talk just a few minutes prior. Even a cursory glance from Genesis 2-4, 6-9 shows that man was given clear instructions by God, that man was not ignorant of who the one true God was. It clearly illustrates that Adam and Eve sinned in a willful and deliberate act of disobedience, thus incurring the curse of original sin with all its trappings. It tells of the exceeding wickedness of men and how God judged them by destroying the earth with a great flood.

It is true that Abraham was probably in a culture that worshiped idols. In fact, according to both Jewish and Islamic tradition this is the very reason God told Abraham to leave the land in which he lived and go to the one which He would show him. But it does not follow from scripture that the God of Abraham developed out of ("emerged from" I believe were the words Bell used) Sumerian culture, as Bell proposes. God sovereignly chose in His good pleasure to speak to Abraham. Bell says this was a new idea that God wasn't angry, but that He was here to bless man and provide.

Of the account of Abraham and Isaac, he states that the ram simply is God telling Abraham "Hey, I'm the one that provides; you don't have to." While on the surface it is true that God provided, nothing is said of Abraham's faith in God, which is said in Hebrews to have been reckoned as righteousness unto him. *That ram was still sacrificed.* It was still offered to God as a burnt offering (presumably for the covering of sins, as with the blood offerings of the Mosaic law).

He then moved forward to the Levitical sacrificial laws, keeping in mind that all these sacrifices were supposedly to make God happy so we'd get blessings, just like the pagan sacrifices. Nowhere is sin mentioned as the underlying reason why sacrifices are even necessary. On a personal note, I thought it was a bit disrespectful and inappropriate for Bell to liken the first five chapters of Leviticus to a poor quality slasher film. Bell skimmed over the different types of offerings mentioned in those passages. Bell rightfully speaks of the Levitical law as removing any doubts as to what God wanted. But he makes a significant error in asserting that these were merely to make God happy and get on His good side. While it is true that the Levitical laws did now show exactly what God required of men as far as their sacrifices were concerned (and I do now appreciate the sacrificial system more because of this understanding), it is not true that they were *merely* to make God happy. **The primary purpose of the sacrifices was to deal with sin.** With the exception of the peace and free-will offerings, the sacrifices dictated by Leviticus were for the atoning for sins.

He transitioned from there to Jesus, who he made out to be nothing more than a social revolutionary. Jesus supposedly shows up to bring down the sacrificial system itself (because of its violence, not because of his fulfillment of the need for sacrifices), not just the corruption that the Pharisees and Sadducees had brought

to it through their greed. According to Bell, Jesus came to get rid of the violence of the sacrificial system once and for all by showing people that God wasn't angry any more and that people didn't have to make sacrifices any more. He was showing them a "new way" to do things. And Jesus didn't resist violently because that wouldn't have been anything different from the old system of violence against animals.

According to Bell the writer of Hebrews was the one who actually developed this idea that the Cross was an altar. He makes Hebrews 10 out to be a text which badmouths the sacrificial system because it says that the blood of bulls and goats is unable to take away sins. His conclusion is that the sacrifices were to take away feelings of guilt, or "primal anxieties" as he called them. The theme of "God is love. God provides. God doesn't demand." continued throughout the night.

Bell misstates the entire purpose of the sacrificial system. He expounds Isaiah 1, Micah 6:7, and Hebrews 9 and 10 as essentially saying that God doesn't really want the sacrifices and He only required them so we wouldn't *feel* guilty any more. For someone who is seminary-educated and a teacher of the Bible, this is woefully ignorant at best, or else it is blatantly revisionist. Scripture makes this clear: God demands blood for sin. Hebrews tells us that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness for sin. The sacrifices of the Mosaic covenant were for the covering of sins. There is no contradiction of terms when Hebrews says that the blood of bulls and goats can not *take away* sin. It is a true saying. The sacrifices of animals were *imperfect* sacrifices, but they did accomplish the purpose of covering sin when accompanied by a repentant heart. Jesus Christ was a perfect sacrifice, being both fully God and fully man, able to satisfy the wrath of God for sin and reconcile sinners who would by grace through faith trust in his sacrifice which was to be made on the Cross.

Rob also grossly misinterprets Isaiah 1 and Micah 6:7. These passages show us not that God requires no sacrifice for sin, but that *faith* and a *contrite heart* are that which make a given sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. The truth which these passages speak is that a rebellious heart can not please God, no matter what sacrifices are offered. Even a layperson with no formal theological training can understand these plain truths from those scriptures.

To restate: Rob's stated view of Jesus death is that he died to abolish the violent sacrificial system, not because he was the fulfillment of it, but because it was violent and made people feel guilty about their sins. This comes as no surprise after we have examined Rob's faulty views of both sin and the purpose of the sacrificial system. To be fair, his line of thinking does somewhat logically flow from wrong views of sin and the necessity of a penalty for sin.

Bell says that the writer of Hebrews is the one who introduced this concept of the Cross as an altar. He calls it a "new idea" that Christ was offered on an altar. But let us examine that claim. I posit to you that it was prophesied long ago that Christ would be a sin offering and that Bell is absolutely contrary to scripture when he asserts that it is a "new idea" that the writer of Hebrews somehow introduced. Let us read from the Word of God which came through the prophet Isaiah.

(1) Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (2) For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. (3) He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (4) Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. (5) But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. (6) All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. (7) He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. (8) By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? (9) His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. (10) But the LORD was pleased To

crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. (11) As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. (12) Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors. (Isa 53:1-12)

Read verse 5 again. He was pierced for what? *Our transgressions*. He was crushed for what? *Our iniquities*. Verse 10 goes on to say “But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.” It is plain to see that Messiah was to be an offering for sin of the many. To say otherwise (as Bell has done) is to preach contrary to the revealed Word of God, which is the sole and final authority in matters of what we are to believe concerning God and the duties which God requires.

Bell mentions Colossians 1:20 and that God is reconciling “all things” to Himself because God is the one who has made peace. No mention is made of any requirement for that reconciliation to take place. Bell’s message to those who are among the enemies of God is simply “God is on your side, just celebrate it.” All we need do is examine this verse in its context to see that Bell is ignoring the requirements for receiving this reconciliation. Recall that reconciliation is a cessation of hostilities, the mutual coming together of two parties who were once at odds with one another, yet now are making peace. I doubt Bell would speak the *true* reason why God made peace with us instead of the other way around (because we are utterly incapable of doing it in the first place). Instead he just says that God has already done it. Let us read Colossians 1:20 in its context.

(19) For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, (20) and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (21) And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind,

engaged in evil deeds, (22) yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach– (23) if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (Col 1:19-23)

Paul makes it clear in verse 23 that we are reconciled if and *only* **“if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast. . .”** The requirement of salvation is faith. The requirement of faith is repentance. The requirement of repentance is rebirth. And the requirement of rebirth is the hearing of the Word and the working of the Holy Spirit to rebirth a person through the Word. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. John 3, Romans 10, and 1 Peter 1, among other passages, make clear what the requirements of salvation are and how exactly it comes to be. Salvation comes when a sinner is reborn by the Spirit, confesses and repents of His sin, and trusts wholly and solely in the work of Christ on the Cross for the forgiveness of his sin.

Bell went on to say that repentance is merely “celebrating what God has already done” or “celebrating God making peace.” This is nothing short of revisionism and it is clear by now what Bell’s agenda is. True repentance is not a celebration as Bell claims. Repentance for a sinner is contrition over his sin, and turning from that sin in the strength of the Spirit which has caused them to be born again. I’m not sure how commonplace it is to use the word “repent” amongst biologists nowadays, but in that field, to repent means to crawl along the ground, to be prostrate. This is a perfect picture of what repenting looks like. It is being so broken over your sin that you fall on your face in sorrow.

Bell continued. According to him, the “reconciliation of all things” of which Paul spoke in Colossians 1 is merely social work. Buying groceries for a poor person and giving a house to a single mom who was just divorced and left without a way to provide for her children were the more emotionally charged examples of this “reconciliation” which Bell claims. Not to say that these are not good deeds and should not be done (certainly they are and should be), but this is a complete revising of what the word “reconciliation” means.

To sum up, Bell put it to us this way: he was stressing himself out over struggles he was having, and his friend kept repeating to him, “You don’t have to live this way.” Bell posits that this is the core message of the Gospel that you don’t have to live this way. “This way” is clearly implied to mean feeling guilty about your sin. Bell has spent 2 hours talking about how all the sacrificial systems were developed because we feel guilty. Jesus came to tell us to stop feeling guilty and that the Kingdom of God is social work.

And so he finished, chanting “You don’t have to live this way. You don’t have to live this way.” as a sort of mantra as music began to play and rise in volume. To be sure, it was a good educational experience as far as pagan gods and the customs of pagan religions were concerned. But on the whole, the Gospel was either revised or else watered down to nothing resembling what Scripture presents as the way of salvation for sinners (which we all are).

If you’re looking for out and out heresy, it won’t be easy to find it in Bell’s message. But what Bell did in two hours can be described as nothing less than deliberately calculated and absolutely unbiblical. His revisionist theology was purposefully cloaked in ambiguity. A man educated in the Scriptures who believes them to be wholly true does *not* spend over an hour speaking on the Hebrew sacrificial system and then speak nothing of sin and of our *actual* guilt before a holy God, instead speaking merely our *feelings* of guilt. A man who believes the Scriptures to be wholly true does not spend over an hour speaking of the covenant which Christ came to *fulfill* – not merely abolish – and then mention nothing of His *fulfillment* of it, indeed making Him out to be nothing more than your run-of-the-mill revolutionary, claiming that Christ as substitutionary atonement was a *new idea* thought up long after His ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection.

If words mean anything, then Rob Bell has largely abandoned the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is plain to see that his gospel is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but a social gospel. It is not a call to true repentance from sin and faith in Christ’s work on the Cross for the forgiveness of sins. It is not a call to leave the lusts of our flesh as Paul repeatedly exhorted the various Gentile Christians to whom he wrote. Rob’s views ultimately find their root in a low view of scripture. His wrong view of sin, wrong view of the purposes of and reasons for

Mosaic sacrifice, and wrong view of Christ and His purpose all find their roots in the systematic ignoring or revising of the clear teachings of scripture because they run contrary to the mind of sinful man.

Conscience demands that I caution you against the teachings of men like Rob Bell. His teachings are in error, being very man-centered, and so much of the Gospel is left out that it cannot rightly be called the Gospel when he has finished speaking. My understanding of scripture leads me to believe that you *must* be born again to see the Kingdom of Heaven. Yes, Christ freely offers forgiveness for sin, but you *must* repent and believe. You must acknowledge your sinfulness and *actual* guilt before a just and holy God. Then you must ask Him in faith to be merciful and save you, believing that Christ has paid the full penalty for your sins by the Cross upon which He suffered and died. If you are not one already, become a disciple of Christ, I implore you. Do not reject Christ and thus abandon the only hope of true peace this world will ever know.

– Bill Carlisle
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