

# The Year Rob Bell Became Methodist

**A review of Rob Bell's latest book, *Love Wins*, by Rev. Jack Amick, Associate Minister, St. Paul's United Methodist Church, Rochester, Michigan**

Back in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, John Wesley raised a ruckus when he started a revival movement in the Anglican Church. It would appear that 21<sup>st</sup> Century Michigan Preacher Rob Bell has taken similar steps among the evangelical community, a form of protestant Christianity which, ironically, has ties to the Methodist camp meeting movement in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America. Three hundred years ago, Wesley traveled outside the walls of the Church to encourage Christians to live their lives more completely as those who were saved by Christ.

Today, Bell seeks to do the same thing by moving outside traditional church settings, using short, accessible videos, giant white boards, and edgy books with titles like *Velvet Elvis*, *Sex God*, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, and *Love Wins*. Bell and Wesley would likely use different language and probably disagree to nuanced meanings of terms such as "heaven," "hell," "sin," "salvation," "grace," "justification," and the like. Nonetheless, both men also might share notes about how they unwittingly began major movements in Christianity.

Aside from the historical parallels, there are some theological patterns which might convince Bell of his Methodism and should convince United Methodists that they can safely extend their "open hearts, open minds and open doors" to the writings and work of this preacher from Grand Rapids. First, the openness itself of Bell's approach, as he seeks to encourage discussion around theological points that are too often taken as fixed and unmovable, is bound to resonate with a church that precedes everything from its buildings to its sacraments with the adjective "open."

*The Book of Discipline*, which details the polity and theology of the United Methodist Church (UMC), points out that creeds, the theological statements of churches, are historic guidelines. The UMC does not consider itself a credal church, one in which certain faith statements are litmus tests of belief. Our hymnal contains a smorgasbord of different affirmations of faith for use in worship. We share with other denominations general beliefs about Christ which are broad enough to contain a variety of viewpoints. Although God is unchanging, our theology is not. As we grow and learn, individually and over the combined history of Christ followers, of God's continual revelatory work, our theology also grows. *The Book of Discipline* calls this process "Our Theological Task."

Theology, for United Methodists, is a process, and not a product. And Bell makes the process of grappling with theology extremely accessible.

One of the hallmarks of United Methodism is the so-called Wesley Quadrilateral: the idea that our understanding of God is drawn not only from scripture, but also from reason, experience and tradition. We encourage people to use the brain God has given them to

connect their experience of God in the world with the collective tradition of the church, and with insights from the Bible.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. David Hempton described the quadrilateral as a “holiness rocket ship,” fueled by scripture and guided by reason, experience and tradition. However you describe it, United Methodists are encouraged to go beyond a strictly literal read of the Bible. Bell does a fine job of weaving together intelligent biblical exploration with important examples from his experience and ours. He throws in a dash of quotations here and there from early church fathers.

From his collegiate days onward, Wesley sought to combine personal piety with social holiness. For Wesley, the two were inextricably linked. Religious acts of prayer, Bible study and Holy Communion were to spill forth into acts of visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, etc. Wesley was almost obsessive in journaling these deeds.

Yet despite all this activity, Wesley came down squarely against “works righteousness” – the idea that one can earn one’s way into heaven. Instead, Wesley suggested that our actions are the result of our new life in Christ. Likewise, one of Bell’s main arguments is that our belief in Christ matters not just because of what it does for us after this life, but mostly because it compels us to push back against hellish systems and situations that exist in our world right here and now.

Free associate with the word “Methodism” and you will soon come up with the word “grace.” For United Methodists, grace, God’s love made real and tangible in this world, is a primary emphasis of our theology. Wesley codified three types of grace and emphasized that God’s work in us and on us and through us is a life-long project. To use Wesley’s phrase, we are constantly “moving on to perfection.”

Grace, Bell shows us, is God’s way of retelling our story. Hell, he says, is when we refuse to trust God to retell the story of our lives.

*Love Wins* is a great read for United Methodists and evangelicals alike. It encourages Good News living by all who follow Christ. Bell remains Christocentric and only dips his toe into the waters of universalism. Beliefs, he reiterates several times, are very important, not because of what they “buy” us in the afterlife, but because of how they cause us to live in this life.

In addition, Bell is intelligent without being academic. Those who like footnotes will be frustrated by this book. And yet the spaciouly set text is peppered with scriptural references and interesting quotes from church history. Bell provides insightful analysis of scripture, drawing out the metaphor and meaning without getting bogged down in too much contextual and linguistic background.

This book has sparked and will continue to spark conversation among thinking Christians. The ideas Bell presents are, on the whole, not new. Their freshness comes in

Bell's logical and compelling presentation. Bell is concise and articulate, but not definitive, thus leaving the door appropriately ajar to conversation.

Only those afraid of dialogue need ban this book.

*Love Wins* reminds us that we are already in attendance with God at His party here on earth. It is up to us to decide whether we wish to dance a heavenly waltz or sit in the corner and pout our hell.

I invite you to read the book and have a conversation, not in an attempt to get everything about heaven and hell sorted out, but to open your heart to the possibility that God's love might just be bigger than you thought.