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# The Theology of Wishful Thinking

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**Friday, August 15, 2003**

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The 'religious' books that make the display tables are more likely to be heretical than orthodox, and *If Grace is True* by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland is a classic example. The book is moving up the sales lists [ranking 3,580 at Amazon.com] and getting media attention. Why? Because it tells itching ears what they want to hear.

The book's subtitle summarizes its argument: "Why God Will Save Every Person." Evangelicals will be tempted to ignore the book, which would be a great mistake. The book is actually one of the most helpful books on this subject to emerge in years. Not, you must understand, because its argument is new or clever, but because the authors actually admit what is required for Christianity to be transformed into universalism.

The authors write as one voice, which gives the book a certain weird tone. The two speak as "I" because "it seemed awkward to use the word we or to distinguish continually between 'Phil' and 'Jim'." Whatever.

The author(s) were taught classic Christian theology. "I grew up believing we were destined for either heaven or hell. I was taught that only those who confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their Savior before they died would live with God forever." So far, so good. Of course, a change of mind is right around the corner—otherwise there would have been no book.

Seven words now frame the authors' theological stance: I believe God will save every person. Well, at least they know how to make a concise statement. The book unfolds its argument by looking at each word of the sentence in turn.

Following a familiar universalist trail, the authors reject God's wrath as a horrible misunderstanding of the divine reality. They insist that the God revealed in Jesus is "a God of unlimited patience, infinite love, and eternal faithfulness." God has picked up an undeserved bad reputation, they insist, but is actually determined to save every single human being who ever lived—no exceptions—even Adolf Hitler.

To reach this conclusion, Gulley and Mulholland must jettison the whole structure of Christian conviction. Sin is basically out, at least as a problem for God. God's holiness must be reconceived, so that He is not really too concerned with sin. Atonement is out, along with any notion of sacrifice. Hell is the invention of twisted minds and heaven is the destiny of all, whether they want to go or not. But they will want to go, at least eventually.

What about the Bible? Gulley and Mulholland admit the problem. Can a Christian believe that God will save everyone? "Obviously, if a Christian must believe the Bible is the 'infallible words of God,' the answer is no. There are too many verses about judgment, hell, and the eternal punishment of the wicked to make such optimism reasonable."

The authors base their argument on the authority of their personal experience and deny the authority of the Bible. We should appreciate their honesty. At least they do not argue that the Bible presents universalism as an option.

Their method of interpreting the Bible posits an abstracted Jesus as the criterion for deciding which biblical texts to trust and which to dismiss. The Jesus of their imagination (unlike the Jesus of the Bible) just wouldn't teach that anyone would go to hell. They have invented a Jesus of their wishful thinking. This is an example of the precise problem that led the Southern Baptist Convention to remove language from its confession of faith stating that the "criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." [see the Baptist Faith and Message] Liberal theologians were using those words as a license to deny the truthfulness of biblical texts.

The evangelical affirmation of Scripture requires an affirmation that all Scripture is a testimony to Christ, and that Christ fulfills all Scripture. Leaving no room for misunderstanding, Christ declared that He came, not "to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." [Matthew 5:17]

Gulley and Mulholland argue that we must weigh the Scriptures in order to separate the wheat (grace, love, salvation) from the chaff (sin, justice, holiness, wrath, hell, judgment, etc.). "Weighing Scripture has allowed me to avoid the all-or-nothing approach to the Bible so common in Christianity . . . . To reject the Bible completely is to miss its proclamation of God's love, but to accept it uncritically is to support some ugly notions about God."

Where did we get such "ugly notions?" From the characters of the Bible, of course. But Joshua, along with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel [their list], "didn't understand the character of God very well." They contributed "valuable insights," but basically got it all wrong.

Note carefully the audacity of their argument. The church has foolishly trusted the teachings of the likes of David, Moses, and Isaiah, when what we really needed was the theological musings of Philip Gulley and James Mulholland.

Gulley and Mulholland do believe we can trust Jesus. Not the Jesus of the Gospels, of course, because He was known to describe salvation as a narrow gate and warn that "the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it." [Matthew 7:13] Jesus, the authors concede, apparently believed in hell.

This would represent a problem if the authors claimed that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, but Gulley and Mulholland deny the divinity of Christ—and much more.

"When I became convinced God would save every person, I tried to hold on to traditional Christian formulas—the trinity, the incarnation, and atonement theology." It was a losing battle. The authors have left this old theological baggage behind, claiming the "new wineskin" of a universalist theology.

The cross is not "meaningless," but merely "illustrates human resistance to grace." Jesus can be called Savior, but no one is lost. Hell is merely fiction, the Trinity is an outdated doctrine, and Christ didn't even have a unique relationship with God: "Was God uniquely present in the life of Jesus? I don't think so."

If Grace is True is important and noteworthy precisely because Gulley and Mulholland make these doctrinal connections. Revisionist evangelicals, pushing for the acceptance of pluralist, inclusivist, and universalist positions, hide or deny these same connections. Gulley and Mulholland prove that universalism requires the denial of orthodox theology as a whole.

Scriptural authority, as always, is the central issue. Gulley and Mulholland reject the inerrancy of the Bible, feel no obligation to harmonize or rationalize difficult texts, and are just willing to say of many verses, "I don't believe that to be true."

The awful truth is that this book will be read by many lost persons, who, lacking a faithful witness to the truth, will stay lost. If Grace is True will add to the theological confusion of our times, and those who love the Gospel of Jesus Christ must see this book and its influence as sheer tragedy.

But the book does make an honest argument, and the authors are excruciatingly candid in their denial of the Gospel. Perhaps it will force others, less honest, to come clean. And perhaps the faithful, seeing these denials in full force, will recognize what is at stake.

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