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Truth in Labeling–The Audacity of Heresy

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Now, Gulley and Mulholland have written *If God Is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World*, and the new book is presented as the next chapter in their unfolding account of their evolving theology. Make no mistake—these authors intend to remake Christianity in their own image. In *If Grace Is True*, the authors presented a glittering and glandular argument for the heresy of universalism—the claim that all persons will eventually be saved because God will not send anyone to Hell. Their approach was cleverly packaged and presented in simple language. They simply rejected one of Christianity’s most central teachings and replaced it with something far more attractive to postmodern Americans. At the affective and emotional levels, the authors urged their readers to shift toward a view of God that was more emotionally satisfying in terms of contemporary concepts of acceptance and love. The deity they present is infinitely nonjudgmental, eternally tolerant, and bears virtually no resemblance to the God of the Bible. That doesn’t stop them from claiming that their new theology is just Christianity reformed. This is a free country, and citizens are free to establish whatever religion they may wish and devise. From Mary Baker Eddy and Joseph Smith to Reverend Moon and Deepak Chopra, Americans—native and naturalized—have been inventing new religions as a national pastime. America has become a marketplace of religious confusions and competing spiritualities. Start a new religion if you are so inclined—just have the integrity not to call what you devise “Christianity.”

In the first book, Gulley and Mulholland jettisoned the entire structure of Christian conviction. Sin makes no sense in a theological structure that excludes judgment. God must be reconceived so that He is no longer a God of justice concerned with righteousness but is instead an agent of personal transformation among His human creatures, calling out the very best in every person and every situation. No one is beyond His salvific purpose, and even Satan will eventually be reconciled to God and will take his place in the great harmonic age to come.

Salvation must be reconceptualized so as to remove any atoning work accomplished by Jesus Christ and reduce the entire scheme of salvation to something like a self-help program that produces and evolves spiritual consciousness.

As I mentioned in my review of *If Grace Is True*, the authors are to be congratulated at at least one point. They do admit that their reformulation of Christianity requires that the Bible be discarded as an infallible and authoritative guide. In arguing for a universal salvation, the Bible is an insurmountable obstacle. Can a Christian believe that God will save everyone? “Obviously, if a Christian must believe that 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 press their argument to a new level in *If God Is Love*, now arguing that Christianity must be transformed from a religion of fear and reward to a “gracious” faith of unconditional acceptance. They urge the church to move from a “theology of fear” to a “theology of grace” that would completely transform Christianity, the church, and religion itself.

As in their first book, the authors write in the singular first person, combining their personal and autobiographical references into one voice. This is a bit eccentric, to say the least, and it makes for an awkward reading experience. Nevertheless, these authors do get their argument across, and in less than subtle terms.

They begin by relating an account of an experience one of the authors endured as pastor of a small congregation. Asked by an elderly woman if he believed in Satan and Hell, the pastor, “eager to prove my theological sophistication,” told her that he did not believe in Satan nor “in a place where people were endlessly tormented.” As he explains, “This was before I learned that answering theological questions directly and honestly is generally a bad idea, and that ministers go to seminary precisely so we can master the theological language necessary to bewilder people when pressed to provide answers they might not like.” That indictment certainly fits some theological seminaries, who train their graduates to speak in theological “double-speak” that sounds conservative but masks a subterfuge of the faith.

Ejected from that pulpit, the pastor quickly found himself in a new church where his liberal theology was much more appreciated. For the remainder of the book, the authors flesh out what this liberal “gracious” religion would look like, and they try to present their product as a reformulated version of Christianity.

The heart of their argument is that classical, biblical Christianity is a “dualistic” theology. Accordingly, “everyone is either under divine control (saved) or in rebellion (unsaved).” Such a dualistic understanding requires the existence of both Heaven and Hell, and generally results in hierarchical systems of religious authority that “see God as severe, rigid, judgmental, intolerant, jealous, and condemning.” As they explain, “The problem with dualistic theologies is that God’s desire is to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned.”

Gulley and Mulholland admit that the Bible is filled with such dualistic teaching and that traditional Christianity has recognized this as the very structure of the faith. Nevertheless, they reject classical Christianity as an intolerant faith that simply does not fit the needs of modern times. In their first book, they argued for the principle of universal salvation. In this second book, they sketch out what shape this new form of Christianity would take, and how it would be applied to many areas of life.

Turning from fear to grace would mean, they argue, leaving behind outdated concepts of sin and God’s judgment. Fear would be replaced with an unconditional acceptance of our acceptance by God. They look back at the Gospel as it was taught to them as children and remember, “every Sunday we were reminded of how Jesus paid it all, how He loved us so much He died for us. The descriptions of His crucifixion were not of a religious reformer killed by the authorities, but of a friend laying down His life for us.” They now see this understanding of Jesus’ life and death as unhealthy, both mentally and spiritually.

When they discuss moving from a “theology of fear” to a theology of grace, they mean abandoning the very structure of reward and punishment, divine justice and atonement, and, of course, the idea of Hell. “Human transformation comes when love casts out fear,” they argue, “assuring us we’ll never be disowned, abandoned, or destroyed. Only in the rich soil of unconditional love can we truly grow. Believing in God’s desire to save every person calms our fears of death and destruction. It assures us of God’s acceptance. Grace gives us the freedom to live boldly.”

Since fear and love are “incompatible,” according to these authors, fear must be discarded as an inappropriate impulse. Even though Jesus warned that we should fear Hell and the wrath of God, these authors simply pick and choose among biblical passages to find a foundation for redefining the faith.

But, if fear of Hell is an inadequate concern for their new religion, so is the hope of Heaven. “Religion focused on escaping hell’s flames is ugly, but appeals based on entering heaven’s gates are equally flawed,” they assert. In other words, we should not love and obey God out of hope of Heaven, but simply for what will come to us in this world through reaching harmony and satisfaction here on earth. “If fear-based theology justifies a God who can be abusive, reward-earning theology creates religious gold diggers—people in relationship for the wrong reasons. Belonging in God’s desire to save every person challenged my need to compete with sinners for some heavenly prize. It allowed me to approach God with gratitude rather than greed. Grace allowed me to move beyond punishment and reward.”

Throughout the book, the authors provide ample evidence of what it takes to transform Christianity into a structure more to their liking. They are honest in rejecting the truthfulness of many biblical passages. Discussing the death of Uzzah as recorded in 2 Samuel 6:7, they acknowledge that the Bible claims that the Lord killed Uzzah because he violated the command not to touch the Ark of the Covenant. This passage reveals a God that punishes wrongdoing, the authors acknowledge. Nevertheless, “I don’t believe that story any longer. I am convinced our heavenly Parent not only expects our indiscretions, but sees them as opportunities not to destroy us, but to encourage and teach us.”

In a similar vein, the authors reject the truthfulness of Ephesians 5:22-23, acknowledging that this passage affirms the authority of husbands in marriage. “Unfortunately, such scriptures, rather than reflecting God’s hope for relationships, reflect the influence of a patriarchal and hierarchical society in which power and control rather than grace held sway.”

In *If God Is Love*, the authors present a complete rejection of classical Christianity and put in its place a postmodern mixture of wishful thinking and theological invention. In their view of a “gracious life,” religion would lead all persons to reject patterns of hierarchical authority, move into an unprecedented age of cooperation and “graciousness,” and recognize that all human beings share the same basic concerns and are assured of the same eventual destiny.

Accordingly, the church of this new religion would reject pastoral authority and would take as its message the universal love of God applied to everyday life. The authors are clearly concerned with maintaining some form and structure of morality, but they offer no insight into how human beings are even to understand what morality would require. In such a structure, where do we gain any understanding of right and wrong?

Interestingly, the authors are unwilling to dispense with these categories altogether. They are certain that the death penalty is wrong and that the church must move to embrace same-gender marriage. Nevertheless, they concede that abortion “is often an ungracious act.” Not that they want to ban abortion altogether, they simply want a world in which abortion would be rare “and always the lesser of two evils.”

Even though this new book is largely a rehash of arguments already presented in *If Grace Is True*, *If God Is Love* does take the reader into new territory. The authors offer various insights on matters ranging from economics to international politics and the roots of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

They do not underestimate the revolutionary character of their arguments. “Becoming gracious will require a reformation that will make Luther’s look like redecorating. It will require us to abandon our claim to be favored children. We’ll have to surrender the Bible as our ace in the hole and Jesus as a backstage pass. The Church will have to serve, rather than dominate, the world. Christianity will need to reclaim its most distinctive doctrine—the universal grace of God. Hell and damnation will no longer be tools of the trade. We’ll need to identify Christians not by what they believe about Jesus, but by their willingness to be like Him.”

Gulley and Mulholland acknowledge that not all will receive their message with acceptance [they even acknowledge my criticism of *If Grace Is True*, commenting, “Not everyone is a fan.”].

These authors have obviously tapped into popular interest and the desire of many postmodern persons to find any spiritual substitute for authentic Christianity. They have every right to devise their own religion and come up with whatever structure of theology and belief they would offer. They have every right to present their case before the world, to organize their own congregations and institutions, ordain their own clergy (if any), and call for converts.

Nevertheless, those who would redefine Christianity and eviscerate the central doctrines of the faith should at least have sufficient integrity not to call their new product Christianity. Liberated from concern for biblical authority, Gulley and Mulholland simply pick and choose among biblical texts, constructing a concept of Jesus that fits their new religion. This has been tried before, and it will be tried again.

Grace is indeed true and God is indeed love, but what Gulley and Mulholland present in these books is simply not Christianity.

