

Is Hell Dead?

Rogue pastor Rob Bell's argument about salvation and judgment has Evangelicals in a fury—and a young generation rethinking Jesus

by Jon Meacham

AS PART OF A SERIES ON PEACE-making, in late 2007, Pastor Rob Bell's Mars Hill Bible Church put on an art exhibit about the search for peace in a broken world. It was just the kind of avant-garde project that had helped power Mars Hill's growth (the Michigan church attracts 7,000 people each Sunday) as a non-traditional congregation that emphasizes discussion rather than dogmatic teaching. An artist in the show had included a quotation from Mohandas Gandhi. Hardly a controversial touch, one would have thought. But one would have been wrong.

A visitor to the exhibit had stuck a note next to the Gandhi quotation: "Reality check: He's in hell." Bell was struck.

Really? he recalls thinking.

Gandhi's in hell?

He is?

We have confirmation of this?

Somebody knows this?

Without a doubt?

And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?

So begins Bell's controversial new best seller, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Works by Evangelical Christian pastors

tend to be pious or at least on theological message. The standard Christian view of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is summed up in the Gospel of John, which promises "eternal life" to "whosoever believeth in Him." Traditionally, the key is the acknowledgment that Jesus is the Son of God, who, in the words of the ancient creed, "for us and for our salvation came down from heaven...and was made man." In the Evangelical ethos, one either accepts this and goes to heaven or refuses and goes to hell.

Bell, a tall, 40-year-old son of a Michigan federal judge, begs to differ. He suggests that the redemptive work of Jesus may be universal—meaning that, as his book's subtitle puts it, "every person who ever lived" could have a place in heaven, whatever that turns out to be. Such a simple premise, but with Easter at hand, this slim, lively book has ignited a new holy war in Christian circles and beyond. When word of *Love Wins* reached the Internet, one conservative Evangelical pastor, John Piper, tweeted, "Farewell Rob Bell," unilaterally

Black sheep Bell's book has been especially controversial among Evangelical Christians because it comes from one of their own



1440 Detail from the manuscript *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*

1480-1505 Detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch



1577-41 Detail from the painting *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo



1804-20 *Emancipation of the Giant African*, William Blake

A Brief History of Hell

If art is any indication, the concept of hell may not be as frightening now as it was in the past

attempting to evict Bell from the Evangelical community. E. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says Bell's book is "theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way." In North Carolina, a young pastor was fired by his church for endorsing the book.

The traditionalist reaction is understandable, for Bell's arguments about heaven and hell raise doubts about the core of the Evangelical worldview, changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation. "When you adopt universalism and erase the distinction between the church and the world," says Mohler, "then you don't need the church, and you don't need Christ, and you don't need the cross. This is the tragedy of non-judgmental mainline liberalism, and it's Rob Bell's tragedy in this book too."

Particularly galling to conservative Christian critics is that *Love Wins* is not an attack from outside the walls of the Evangelical city but a mutiny from within—a rebellion led by a charismatic, popular and savvy pastor with a following. Is Bell's Christianity—less judgmental, more fluid, open to questioning the most ancient of assumptions—on an inexorable rise? "I have long wondered if there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian," Bell says. "Something new is in the air."

Which is what has many traditional Evangelicals worried: Bell's book sheds light not only on enduring questions of theology and fate but also on a shift within American

Christianity. More indie rock than "Rock of Ages," with its videos and comfort with irony (Bell sometimes seems an odd combination of Billy Graham and Conan O'Brien), his style of doctrine and worship is clearly playing a larger role in religious life, and the ferocity of the reaction suggests that he is a force to be reckoned with.

Otherwise, why reckon with him at all? A similar work by a pastor from one of the declining mainline Protestant denominations might have merited a hostile blog post or two—Bloggers, like pastors, always need material—but it is difficult to imagine that an Episcopal priest's eschatological musings would have provoked the volume of criticism directed at Bell, whose reach threatens prevailing Evangelical theology.

Bell insists he is only raising the possibility that theological rigidity—and thus a faith of exclusion—is a dangerous thing. He believes in Jesus' atonement, he says he is just unclear on whether the redemption promised in Christian tradition is limited to those who meet the tests of the church. It is a case for living with mystery rather than demanding certitude.

From a traditionalist perspective, though, to take away hell is to leave the church without its most powerful sanction. If heaven, however defined, is everyone's ultimate destination in any event, then what's the incentive to confess Jesus as Lord in this life? If, in other words, Gandhi is in heaven, then why bother with accepting Christ? If you say the Bible doesn't really say what a lot of people have said it says, then where does that stop? If the verses about hell and judgment aren't literal, what about the ones on adultery, sex,

or homosexuality? Taken to their logical conclusion, such questions could undermine much of conservative Christianity.

What the Hell?

FROM THE SPOTLIGHT PAGE 10 PAGES AGO, it, from Augustine to Calvin, Christians have debated atonement and judgment for nearly 2,000 years. Early in the 20th century, Harry Emerson Fosdick came to represent theological liberalism, arguing against the literal truth of the Bible and the existence of hell. It was at times, progressives argued, for the faith to surrender its supernatural claims.

Bell is more at home with this expansive liberal tradition than he is with the old-time believers of *Jesus the World*. He believes that Jesus, the Son of God, was sacrificed for the sins of humanity and that the prospect of a place of eternal torment seems irreconcilable with the God of love. Belief in Jesus, he says, should lead human beings to work for the good of this world. What comes next has to wait. "When we get to what happens when we die, we don't have any video footage," says Bell. "So let's at least be honest that we are speculating, because we are." He is quick to note, though, that his own speculation, while unconventional, is not ungrounded. "At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church," Bell writes, "have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God."

It is also true that the Christian tradition since the first church has insisted that history is tragic for those who do not believe in Jesus that hell is, for them, forever, and that love, in the end, will envelop those

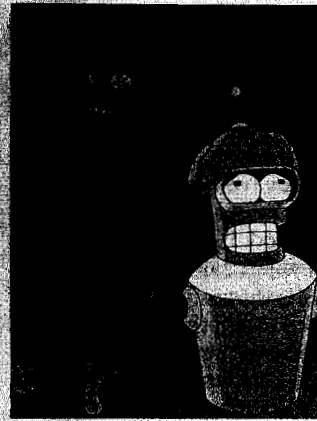
(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) MANUSCRIPT: THE HOURS OF CATHERINE OF CLEVES; BOSCH: THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS; MICHELANGELO: THE LAST JUDGMENT; BLAKE: THE EMANCIPATION OF THE GIANT AFRICAN



1941 The Three Stooges burn in hell in *I'll Never Hell Again*



1949 Tom and Jerry: Spike coaxes Tom to give Jerry the works in *Heavenly Puss*



1999 On *Futurama*, the devil robot visits Bender



2010 Dante's *Divine Comedy*, artist Seymour Chwast's first graphic novel

who profess Jesus as Lord, and they—and they alone—will be reconciled to God. Such views cannot be dismissed because they are inconvenient or uncomfortable: they are based on the same Bible that liberals use to make the opposite case. This is one reason religious debate can seem a wilderness of mirrors, an old CIA phrase describing the bewildering world of counterintelligence.

Still, the dominant view of the righteous in heaven and the damned in hell owes more to the artistic legacy of the West, from Michelangelo to Dante to Blake, than it does to history or to unambiguous biblical teaching. Neither pagan nor Jewish tradition offered a truly equivalent vision of a place of eternal torment; the Greek and Roman underworlds tended to be morally neutral, as did much of the Hebraic tradition concerning Sheol, the realm of the dead.

Things many Christian believers take for granted are more complicated than they seem. It was only when Jesus failed to return soon after the Passion and Resurrection appearances that the early church was compelled to make sense of its recollections of his teachings. Like the Bible—a document that often contradicts itself and from which one can construct sharply different arguments— theology is the product of human hands and hearts. What many believers in the 21st century accept as immutable doctrine was first formulated in the fog and confusion of the 1st century, a time when the followers of Jesus were baffled and overwhelmed by their experience of losing their Lord; many had expected their Messiah to be a Davidic military leader, not an atoning human sacrifice.

When Jesus spoke of the “kingdom of heaven,” he was most likely referring not

to a place apart from earth, one of clouds and harps and an eternity with your grandmother, but to what he elsewhere called the “kingdom of God,” a world redeemed and renewed in ways beyond human imagination. To 1st century ears in ancient Judea, Jesus’ talk of the kingdom was centered on the imminent arrival of a new order marked by the defeat of evil, the restoration of Israel and a general resurrection of the dead—all, in the words of the prayer he taught his disciples, “on earth.”

There is, however, no escaping the fact that Jesus speaks in the Bible of a hell for the “condemned.” He sometimes uses the word *Gehenna*, which was a valley near Jerusalem associated with the sacrifice of children by fire to the Phoenician god Moloch; elsewhere in the New Testament, writers (especially Paul and John the Divine) tell of a fiery pit (Tartarus or Hades) in which the damned will spend eternity. “Depart from me, you cursed [ones], into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” Jesus says in Matthew. In Mark he speaks of “the unquenchable fire.” The Book of Revelation paints a vivid picture—in a fantastical, problematic work that John the Di-

vine says he composed when he was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day,” a signal that this is not an Associated Press report—of the lake of fire and the dismissal of the damned from the presence of God to a place where “they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

And yet there is a contrary scriptural trend that suggests, as Jesus puts it, that the gates of hell shall not finally prevail, that God will wipe away every tear—not just the tears of Evangelical Christians but the tears of all. Bell puts much stock in references to the universal redemption of creation: in Matthew, Jesus speaks of the “renewal of all things”; in Acts, Peter says Jesus will “restore everything”; in Colossians, Paul writes that “God was pleased to... reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

So is it heaven for Christians who say they are Christians and hell for everybody else? What about babies, or people who die without ever hearing the Gospel through no fault of their own? (As Bell puts it, “What if the missionary got a flat tire?”) Who knows? Such tangles have consumed Christianity for millennia and likely will for millennia to come.

What gives the debate over Bell new significance is that his message is part of an intriguing scholarly trend unfolding simultaneously with the cultural, generational and demographic shifts made manifest at Mars Hill. Best expressed, perhaps, in the work of N.T. Wright, the Anglican bishop of Durham, England (Bell is a Wright devotee), this school focuses on the meaning of the texts themselves, reading them anew and seeking, where appropriate, to ask whether an idea is truly rooted in the New

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Testament or is attributable to subsequent church tradition and theological dogma.

For these new thinkers, heaven can mean different things. In some biblical contexts it is a synonym for God. In others it signifies life in the New Jerusalem, which, properly understood, is the reality that will result when God brings together the heavens and the earth. In yet others it seems to suggest moments of intense human communion and compassion that are, in theological terms, glimpses of the divine love that one might expect in the world to come. One thing heaven is not is an exclusive place removed from earth. This line of thinking has implications for the life of religious communities in our own time. If the earth is, in a way, to be our eternal home, then its care, and the care of all its creatures, takes on fresh urgency.

Bell's Journey

THE EASY NARRATIVE ABOUT BELL WOULD be one of rebellion—that he is reacting to the strictures of a suffocating childhood by questioning long-standing dogma. The opposite is true. Bell's creed of conviction and doubt—and his comfort with ambiguity and paradox—comes from an upbringing in which he was immersed in faith but encouraged to ask questions. His father, a central figure in his life, is a federal judge appointed by President Reagan in 1987. (Rob still remembers the drive to Washington in the family Oldsmobile for the confirmation hearings.) "I remember him giving me C.S. Lewis in high school," Bell says. "My parents were both very intellectually honest, straightforward, and for them, faith meant that you were fully engaged." As they were raising their family, the Bells, in addition to regular churchgoing, created a rigorous ethos of devotion and debate at home. Dinner-table conversations were pointed; Lewis' novels and nonfiction were required reading.

The roots of *Love Wins* can be partly traced to the deathbed of a man Rob Bell never met: his grandfather, a civil engineer in Michigan who died when Rob's father was 8. The Bells' was a very conservative Evangelical household. When the senior Bell died, there was to be no grief. "We weren't allowed to mourn, because the funeral of a Christian is supposed to be a celebration of the believer in heaven with Jesus right now," says Robert Bell Sr. "But if you're 8 years old and your dad—the breadwinner—just died, it feels different. Sad."

The story of how his dad, still a child,

was to deal with death has stayed with Rob. "To weep, to shed any tears—that would be doubting the sovereignty of God," Rob says now, looking back. "That was the thing—'They're all in heaven, so we're happy about that.' It doesn't matter how you are actually humanly responding to this moment..." Bell pauses and chuckles ironically, a bit incredulous. "We're all just supposed to be thrilled."

Robby—his mother still calls him that—was emotionally precocious. "When he was around 10 years old, I detected that he had a great interest and concern for people," his father says. "There he'd be, riding along with me, with his little blond hair, going to see sick folks or friends who were having problems, and he would get back in the truck after a visit and begin to analyze them and their situations very acutely. He had a feel for people and how they felt from very early on."

Rob was a twice-a-week churchgoer at the Baptist and nondenominational churches the family attended at different times—services on Sunday, youth group on Wednesday. He recalls a kind of quiet frustration even then. "I remember think-

ing, 'You know, if Jesus is who this guy standing up there says he is, this should be way more compelling.' This should have a bit more electricity. The knob should be way more to the right, you know?"

Music, not the church, was his first consuming passion. (His wife Kristen claims he said he wanted to be a pastor when they first met early on at Wheaton College in Illinois. Bell is skeptical: "I swear to this day that that was a line.") He and some friends started a band when he was a sophomore. "I had always had creative energy but no outlet," he says. "I really discovered music, writing and playing, working with words

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Packed house Bell's Mars Hill Bible Church draws 7,000 people each Sunday; its sanctuary is called the Shed

sense of himself as a player in the unfolding drama of God in history. "Create things and share them," Bell says. "It all made sense. That moment is etched. I remember thinking distinctly, 'I could be terrible at this.' But I knew this would get me up in the morning. I went to Fuller that fall."

Fuller Theological Seminary, in Pasadena, Calif., is an eclectic place, attracting 4,000 students from 70 countries and more than 100 denominations. "It's pretty hard to sit with Pentecostals and Holiness people and mainline Presbyterians and Anglicans and come away with a closed mind-set that draws firm boundaries about theology," says Fuller president Richard Mouw.

After seminary, Bell's work moved in two directions. He was recovering the context of the New Testament while creating a series of popular videos on Christianity called Nooma, Greek for wind or spirit. He began to attract a following, and Mars Hill—named for the site in Athens where Paul preached the Christian gospel of resurrection to the pagan world—was founded in Grand Rapids, Mich., in 1999. "Whenever people wonder why a church is growing, they say, 'He's preaching the Bible.' Well, lots of people are preaching the Bible, and they don't have parking problems," says Bell.

Mars Hill did have parking problems, and Bell's sudden popularity posed some risks for the young pastor. Pride and self-involvement are perennial issues for ministers, who, like politicians, grow accustomed to the sound of their own voices saying Important Things and to the deference of the flock. By the time Bell was 30, he was an Evangelical celebrity. (He had founded Mars Hill when he was 28.) He was referred to as a "rock star" in this magazine. "There was this giant spotlight on me," he says. "All of a sudden your words are parsed. I found myself—and I think this happens to a lot of people—wanting to shrink away from it. But I decided, just own it. I'm very comfortable in a room with thousands of people. I do have this voice. What will I say?"

And how will he say it? The history of Evangelism is in part the history of media and methods: Billy Sunday mastered the radio, Billy Graham television; now churches like Bell's are at work in the digital vineyards of downloads and social media. Demography is also work-

ing in Bell's favor. "He's trying to reach a generation that's more comfortable with mystery, with unsolved questions," says Mouw, noting that his own young grandchildren are growing up with Hindu and Muslim friends and classmates. "For me, Hindus and Muslims were the people we sent missionaries off to in places we called 'Arabia,'" Mouw says. "Now that diversity is part of the fabric of daily life. It makes a difference. My generation wanted truth—these are folks who want authenticity. The whole judgmentalism and harshness is something they want to avoid."

If Bell is right about hell, then why do people need ecclesiastical traditions at all? Why aren't the Salvation Army and the United Way sufficient institutions to enact a gospel of love, sparing us the talk of heaven and hellfire and damnation and all the rest of it? Why not close up the churches?

Bell knows the arguments and appreciates the frustrations. "I don't know anyone who hasn't said, 'Let's turn out the lights and say we gave it a shot,'" he says. "But you can't—I can't—get away from what this Jesus was, and is, saying to us. What the book tries to do is park itself right in the midst of the tension with a Jesus who offers an urgent and immediate call—'Repent! Be transformed! Turn!' At the same time, I've got other sheep. There's a renewal of all things. There's water from the rock. People will come from the East and from the West. The scandal of the gospel is Jesus' radical, healing love for a world that's broken."

Fair enough, but let's be honest: religion heals, but it also kills. Why support a supernatural belief system that, for instance, contributed to that minister in Florida's burning of a Koran, which led to the deaths of innocent U.N. workers in Afghanistan?

"I think Jesus shares your critique," Bell replies. "We don't burn other people's books. I think Jesus is fairly pissed off about it as well."

On Sunday, April 17, at Mars Hill, Bell will be joined by singer-songwriter Brie Stoner (who provided some of the music for his Nooma series) and will teach the first 13 verses of the third chapter of Revelation, which speaks of "the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God... Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The precise meaning of the words is open to different interpretations. But this much is clear: Rob Bell has much to say, and many are listening. ■

and images and metaphors. You might say the music unleashed a monster."

The band became central to him. Then two things happened: the guitar player decided to go to seminary, and Bell came down with viral meningitis. "It took the wind out of our sails," he says. "I had no Plan B. I was a wreck. I was devastated, because our band was going to make it. We were going to live in a terrible little house and do terrible jobs at first, because that's what great bands do—they start out living in terrible little houses and doing terrible little jobs." His illness—"a freak brain infection"—changed his life, Bell says.

At 21, Rob was teaching barefoot water-skiing at HoneyRock Camp, near Three Lakes, Wis., when he preached his first sermon. "I didn't know anything," he says. "I took off my Birkenstocks beforehand. I had this awareness that my life would never be the same again." The removal of the shoes is an interesting detail for Bell to remember. ("Do not come any closer," God says to Moses in the Book of Exodus. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.") Bell says it was just intuitive, but the intuition suggests he had a