

Rob Bell

By Everett Berry

Founding Date: Bell is the founder and teaching pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, MI. The church's affiliation is nondenominational.

Key Books: *Velvet Elvis*, *Sex God*, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, *Drops Like Stars*, *Love Wins*¹

Mass Media: *Nooma* Video Teaching Series (24 films, 2001-2009); *The God's Aren't Angry* (Download or DVD); *Everything is Spiritual* (Download or DVD); *Poets/Prophets/Teachers* (Five Downloads, 2009); *Drops Like Stars* (Download or DVD)

HISTORY

Personal: Robert Holmes Bell Jr. was born August 23, 1970 to Robert and Helen Bell. Along with his sister Ruth and brother John, Bell grew up with his Christian parents in Okemos, Michigan which is located in the metro area of Lansing.² His father was a leading judiciary figure who was nominated by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 to serve on the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan.³ During this time, Bell was a standard church attendee at both Baptist and nondenominational churches.⁴ Later he chose to attend Wheaton College, his parent's alma mater, where he pursued a bachelor's degree in psychology and also met his wife Kristen.

While in school, Bell also showed musical potential by helping form an indie rock band which started off well until it had to part ways suddenly because the guitar player decided to attend seminary and Bell incurred viral meningitis.⁵ After recovering, he later got a random chance to teach a group of counselors at the site of his summer-break job at HoneyRock Camp near Three Lakes Wisconsin. After receiving encouragement from patrons regarding his teaching abilities and graduating from Wheaton, Bell and his wife moved to Pasadena, California to attend Fuller Theological Seminary so he could obtain a M. Div. degree.⁶ For a time Bell then served as a youth intern at Lake Avenue Church and dabbled in the music scene again by helping form another band.⁷ However, this did not distract him from ministry because after graduating Bell returned to Grand Rapids to serve under Pastor Ed Dobson of Calvary Church. And it was here that Bell received the preaching duties for the Saturday night service and eventually began to solidify many of his theological perspectives.

Pastoral Ministry: After serving at Calvary, Bell along with a gathering of people who shared his vision of ministry held their first service in February of 1999.⁸ They called the new start Mars Hill to show solidarity with the Apostle Paul's famous interaction with the Athenians in Acts 17:24-27.⁹ Over 1,000 people participated in the first assembly and it grew to 4,000 within six months.¹⁰ Also for the first 18 months, the church met in a school gym in Wyoming, Michigan that they nicknamed "The Hangar."¹¹ But when they exceeded maximum capacity, the church was then given a shopping mall in Grandville, Michigan which led to the further purchasing of surrounding land.¹² Within a few years, attendance reached 8,000 and by 2005 it peaked at 11,000.¹³

Alongside this trek of success came the inevitable challenge of fame. For instance, in 2006 the *Chicago Sun Times* labeled Bell as possibly the next Billy Graham and the next year in the January 2007 issue of the magazine *TheChurchReport.com* he was named number ten in their list of "The 50 Most Influential Christians in America."¹⁴ Additionally, some sources even labeled him a possible Christian "rockstar" because of his cultural appeal to gen exers and millennials.¹⁵ Yet in the midst of this flurry of attention, Bell recaps that he hit a wall of severe burnout at the celebration of his church's fifth anniversary. He visited a doctor who warned him about his schedule excesses and so subsequently Bell found a therapist with whom met during a ten week break.¹⁶ Then upon returning to his tasks, he set a more regimented

schedule which included a weekly Sabbath and the delegating of certain pastoral duties to staff in order to alleviate the church workload.¹⁷

Media/Publications/Tours: Whereas Billy Sunday took full advantage of the radio in the early 20th century and Billy Graham made full use of television in the mid to late 20th century, Bell has taken full advantage of electronic downloads, social media, and book/circuit tours in the 21st.¹⁸ His iconic achievements began in 2001 with the compilation of a series of short devotionally oriented films entitled NOOMA, which is a phonetic wordplay of the Greek word *pneuma*. This project eventually resulted in some 1.2 million copies being sold in 80 countries.¹⁹ Later in 2005, Zondervan published Bell's first book entitled *Velvet Elvis* and in 2006 he then launched a speaking tour in Chicago on the theme of *Everything is Spiritual*. The next year in March, the release of Bell's second book *Sex God* resulted in tours to several universities. Likewise, in 2007 Bell led another tour in June to the United Kingdom and Ireland on the theme of peacemaking only to return to Chicago and hold another series of talks entitled *The God's Aren't Angry*. In 2008, Zondervan produced Bell's third book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* and his fourth book in 2009 entitled *Drops Like Stars*, which led to an international tour. Then in July of 2009 Bell led a seminar in Grand Rapids called *Poets, Prophets, and Preachers*.²⁰

DOCTRINE

Bell asserts that often in western thought, Christianity becomes mired in legal and forensic paradigms which typically sterilize the message of the gospel.²¹ Consequently, he is convinced that many believers often lose sight of the mysterious intangibles of the faith. So as an alternative, he wishes to rediscover Christianity as a sort of Eastern religion that is defined by an engaging search for ultimate reality that is indicative of a way of life. Bell describes this on occasion in terms of being a kind of militant mystic.²² The growing concern with Bell, however, is that his journey has gradually led him to jettison crucial ideas such as the full inspiration of Scripture and the concept of *sola scriptura*.²³

Furthermore, his ideological shifts have reached a point of crisis in his most recent publication in 2011, which is entitled *Love Wins*. This volume has incited the most controversy thus far because Bell openly questions the eternal destiny of unbelievers. He argues in a rather nebulous way that while unbelievers do receive hell now and in the hereafter, it still is possible for them to experience the new creation in the eternal state if they should repent.²⁴ This carefully nuanced idea caused early tensions when Zondervan questioned whether the book aligned with company goals.²⁵ Coupled with this dilemma were publicized rumblings in the Christian blogosphere vocalizing objections before the volume was released because Bell had issued a preliminary promotional video where he dropped clear hints about the direction he would be going.²⁶ Subsequently other Christian leaders mounted their critiques which gave the new publisher HarperOne the incentive to release the book two weeks earlier than the original date.²⁷ Moreover, there continues to be earnest debate regarding the influence of Bell's ideas.²⁸ So it is important to be aware of some of his arguments regarding hell.

God's Immanence in Other Religions: To begin, Bell proposes that God uses various means to reveal salvific truth to people apart from the explicit content of the gospel. An example Bell uses to illustrate this is Paul's interpretation of Exodus 17 wherein the rock which provided water for the Israelites is identified as Christ (1 Cor 10:4).²⁹ Bell asserts that if Christ revealed himself in a seemingly random way to a people unaware of the explicit source, what is to say that He is not still revealing truth to others through all sorts of means all the time. If people are responding to all forms of truth, whether it is disclosed through nature, religions, or personal experiences, then salvation is provided for them. Ironically though, Bell quickly adds a disclaimer that he does not think morally upstanding unbelievers are necessarily covert Christians.³⁰ But the fact is that when it comes to defining the criteria of a bona fide believer, Bell is somewhat disingenuous because he deliberately wants to leave the question open-ended.³¹

No One Reaches a Point of No Return: Bell also argues that if God genuinely desires to save everyone, then the idea of hell being a permanent state of existence contravenes his will.³² Why? Because hell establishes a condition that God can never reverse. It holds people in an eternal state of hopelessness. Therefore, either his sovereignty is dubious because he cannot be reconciled to people after death or his love is ineffective because it cannot win the hearts of people after they die. So as a solution, Bell implies that the same God who lovingly provides

opportunities for people to receive his love in this life likewise exercises that prerogative in the life to come.³³ If people want to choose to reject him in hell, then he will give them what they want. Yet if they eventually show a desire to love him, then he will accept them. Bell even tries to support this by appealing to the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 which is described as having gates that are always open so anyone can come in and out of the city if they so choose.³⁴

Hell Leads to Restoration: Bell conflates the previous point with the idea that final judgment actually occurs in order to potentially bring people back to God. As examples, Bell quotes passages that speak of God restoring nations which have been judged in the past such as Egypt, Israel and even Sodom and Gomorrah.³⁵ They are restored in Bell's mind through an intense period of correction or pruning as he calls it. Bell contends that eternal punishment should not be understood as unending judgment but rather as extremely intense discipline that is enacted to show people the consequences of their actions so as to motivate them to repentance.³⁶

A Violent God is not the God of the Gospel: At the end of the day, Bell finally asserts that the idea of God eternally punishing unbelievers is morally hurtful to the proclamation of the gospel because it indicts God's very nature. To say God is loving only up to the point of death and then he suddenly becomes a bringer of unending judgment is psychologically crushing.³⁷ Consequently, Bell contends that unbelievers are reluctant to embrace Jesus because they do not feel they can trust the God he represents.³⁸ In Bell's own words, he questions whether someone who may live for 17 years and die must be punished for more than 17 million years for only 17 years of sin.³⁹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Inclusivistic Universalism: One major component that Bell utilizes to construct his idea of theoretical universalism is his embracing of inclusivism which says that people can know Christ through many venues, including assorted religions and random personal experiences. The problem, however, is that he convolutes the means which the New Testament emphasizes for how God reveals the gospel to the nations.

One can see this void in his extrapolation of Paul's commentary of the rock in the Exodus story because Bell omits the larger context Paul's argument. Israel was God's people who had experienced the same Red Sea deliverance, received the same manna from heaven, and drank from the same rock. The point is that there was covenantal solidarity which interpreted the sources of provision for the people.

The same is true for the incarnation. Christ could only be understood for who he was in light of his mission to Israel as the Messiah who would bring salvation to the nations. The point being that there is always a covenantal context which defines God's actions in history and today that context is the message of the gospel. But without that context, the only thing people will do when they look at the world is practice different forms of idolatry.

Reconciliation of "All Things" does not mean All People: There are two major voids regarding the restoration of creation that Bell creates. One is that when Scripture speaks of the redemption of people from every tribe and tongue, this does not imply every person from every tribe and tongue. Just as there are those who become a kingdom of priests for the Lamb (Rev 5:9-10), there are many others who hide from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6:15-17).

The other problem is that Bell's discussion of God's desire for the salvation of all people can only be resolved if people can repent in hell. And nowhere in Scripture is hell described in such terms. Furthermore, the reconciliation of all things does not mean the salvation of all humanity. Rather the New Testament describes the fact that Christ's work of redemption defeats the powers of the present age of sin, death, and Satan. Why? So a new humanity can be formed in Christ, heaven can eventually come to take up its residence upon a new earth, and all those who choose to stay in rebellion can experience divine justice.

Final Judgment is not Redemptive: Contra Bell's doubts about hell being eternally retributive, Scripture never describes final judgment as being corrective or rehabilitative. The examples that Bell appeals to regarding God's restoration of rebellious nations are problematic because most of them are describing God's promises to restore a remnant within Israel because of his covenant with Abraham.

Even his quotation in Matthew about Sodom and Gomorrah has nothing to do with these cities' restoration. It is rather just the opposite because he is actually indicting other cities with a greater degree of guilt. Likewise, his discussion of the New Jerusalem conveniently omits any serious engagement with the imagery of judgment in Revelation 19-20 or John's claims that only those who are in the Lamb's book of Life are allowed to be a part of the city (Rev 21:27). The rest are excluded (Rev 22:15).

The God Nobody Wants: As to the charge that a God who punishes unbelievers forever is psychologically damaging, one must not forget that Scripture is filled with scenarios that are emotionally jolting and frankly unacceptable to the modern mind. God destroys all the inhabitants of the earth except for Noah and his family (Gen 7:23); Aaron the High Priest is not permitted to mourn publicly for his two sons who were killed (Lev 10:4-6); Moses is denied entrance to the Promised Land for one act of disobedience (Num 20:11-12); Ezekiel is told not to mourn for his dead wife (Ez 24:15-17); An angel warns Joseph of Herod's plot to kill baby Jesus but not inform all the other mothers in Bethlehem (Matt 2:13-18); and God comforts yearning martyrs with the promise that more will suffer the same fate (Rev 6:9-11).

The real problem for Bell is that ironically, he is inescapably western at this point. Why? Because he wants to domesticate God so he will be intellectually permissible to people who want to consider Christianity as somehow viable in a modern and/or postmodern age. The problem though is that God cannot be tamed or deconstructed. The same One who will judge unbelievers in the future (2 Thess 1:5-10) likewise stands as wrathful against them now (Jn 3:36). So God does not change from being loving to wrathful at death. Rather the full realization of his wrath begins after death (Heb 9:27).

Notes

- 1 See https://www.robbell.com/work/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=1 for information about his books.
- 2 Terri Finch Hamilton, "Profile: Mars Hill Bible Church pastor Rob Bell," *Grand Rapids Press* (2008); Website, http://blog.mlive.com/grpress/2008/03mars_hill_bible_church_pastor.html, accessed 4-25-11.
- 3 Federal Judicial Center, "Bell, Robert Holmes," Website: www.fjc.gov/servlet/nGetInfo?jid=148&cid=999&ctype=na&instate=na, accessed April 4-23-11.
- 4 Jon Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?" *Time*. Website, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,2065080,00.html>, accessed 4-23-11; Hamilton, "Profile."
- 5 Cf., Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?"; Hamilton, "Profile."; Bell gives his thoughts on this experience in "My Faith: Suffering my way to a New Tomorrow," Website: <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/02/13/my-faith-suffering-my-way-to-a-new-tomorrow>, accessed 4-23-11.
- 6 Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?"
- 7 *Encyclopedia*, "Rob Bell Jr." Website, http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Rob_Bell, Accessed 4-23-11; Mars Hill Bible Church, Homepage Website, <http://marshill.org/history/>, accessed April 23, 2011.
- 8 Mars Hill Bible Church, Homepage Website.
- 9 Cf., Ibid; and Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?"
- 10 Hamilton, "Profile."
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- 12 Cf., Ibid; and *Encyclopedia*, "Rob Bell Jr."
- 13 Hamilton, "Profile."
- 14 Cf., See Cathleen Falsani, "The next Billy Graham?" *The Chicago Sun Times* (June 6, 2006); Corey Miller, *The Websites of the 50 Most Influential Evangelicals in America* (2007), Website, <http://churchcommunicationspro.com/2007/01/the-websites-of-the-50-most-influential-christians-in-america/>; and Corey Miller, *The Websites of the 50 Most Influential Evangelicals in America* (2007), accessed 4-23-11
- 15 See David Van Biema, "The Hipper-Than-Thou Pastor," *Time* (December 6, 2007), website, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1692051,00.html, accessed 4-23-11; Julie Hoogland, "Rob Bell, Christian rock star, meets Sammy Hagar, real rock star, on Good Morning America set," *The Grand Rapids Press* (March 15, 2011), website, http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2011/03/rob_bell_christian_rock_star_m.html, accessed 4-23-11; Hamilton, "Profile."
- 16 Hamilton, "Profile."
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?"
- 19 Hamilton, "Profile."
- 20 To see the order of Bell's publications and tours, cf., *Encyclopedia*, "Rob Bell,"; and RobBell Homepage website, https://www.robbell.com/work/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=3, accessed 4-24-11.
- 21 Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, website, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=8>, Accessed 4-24-11.
- 22 Mark Galli, "The Giant Story," *Christianity Today*, website, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=81195, accessed 4-24-11.
- 23 Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 65-68.
- 24 Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, especially chapter 3 on "Hell" (pgs. 63-93) and chapter 4 concerning "Does God get what He wants," (pgs. 95-119).
- 25 See discussion in Eric Marrapodi, "Firststorm grows over Christian Heresy Book," CNN Website, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/08/firestorm-over-bell-book-continues/>, accessed 4-24-11.
- 26 Cf., Ibid; and Justin Taylor, *Between Two Worlds*, website, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist/>, accessed 4-24-11.
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- 28 One pastor was dismissed from his church because he supported Bell's book on Facebook. See Jonathon M. Seidl, "Pastor Fired After Backing New Rob Bell Book Questioning Hell," *The Blaze* (2011), website, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/pastor-fired-after-backing-new-rob-bell-book-questioning-hell/>, accessed 4-24-11.
- 29 Bell, *Love Wins*, 140-144.
- 30 Ibid., 154-55.
- 31 Ibid., 155.
- 32 See discussion in Ibid., ch. 4: Does God get what God Wants?, 95-119.
- 33 Ibid., 115-116.
- 34 Ibid., 112-113.
- 35 Ibid., 83-89. Regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, he grossly misinterprets Ezekiel 16 and Matthew 10:15.
- 36 Ibid., 91-93.
- 37 Ibid., 174-175.
- 38 Ibid., 175.
- 39 Listen to interview Bell has about *Love Wins* with Justin Brierley on the British Radio Show *Unbelievable*, website, <http://www.premierradio.org.uk/listen/ondemand.aspx?mediaid=298691E0-6BA5-4B74-97DD-3BB6FFBC0F1F>, accessed 4-29-11.



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