



Interview by Steve Turner

Ding Dong

The US pastor **Rob Bell**, who founded the 'megachurch' Mars Hill in Michigan, has stirred up a hell of a controversy with his latest book, *Love Wins*. *Third Way* confronted him at his publisher's headquarters in west London.

How did you become a Christian?

My parents are Christians and they were very intellectually rigorous. For them, faith was this exploration, this pursuit, this discussion. So, I grew up around that – and from a young age I found Jesus very compelling.

Can you recall a particular moment of conversion?

I remember in elementary school saying this prayer I had picked up somewhere. I had been taught that you accept Jesus, you give your life to him, you thank God for the forgiveness of sins and you become a follower. At elementary school, that meant something to me.

Did it mean less to you as you grew older?

It was something I struggled to understand. How does this fit with the world I live in? In high school, there was the sports crowd – like, at lunch – and then there were the Christians, over in the corner. I played sports and I remember the sense of not really knowing where I fit. And what stayed with me was that the world I lived in was all about hierarchy – there were the best athletes, the best students, the most popular kids; it was all about where you rank – and these gospel stories were about Jesus who validated and affirmed people by some completely other scale where you were loved just because you are. In adolescence, that meant something to me.

So, you weren't embarrassed by the faith you grew up in? You found it more compelling than all those hierarchies?

I found Jesus compelling. But church didn't seem very interesting to me. Like, if Jesus is who he is supposed to

be and who Christians say he is, church should be riveting. If these are the deepest truths of the universe, you should be on the edge of your seat. So, I always had a running list of questions – like, there's got to be a better way to think about this.

When I was in college, I heard about the Jesus People in downtown Chicago, who lived communally and put their pay cheques into a common fund. I went to one of their gatherings and, when it was done, they pushed all the chairs against the wall and brought in all these mattresses. For them, Jesus meant that on a cold night you make sure that homeless people have some place to sleep.

So, I had a series of experiences like that, where I met another Jesus. It was like: Wait, wait, wait! This is different from singing hymns and, like, making sure everybody recites the right creed. This is doing something about the suffering of the world.

You went to Wheaton, the Christian liberal arts college near Chicago which has associations with Billy Graham...

I did, yes – and there I came across all these interesting people. It has a very international feel, so there were students who were going abroad to do humanitarian work and there were students who were doing sculpture – and all of this somehow fit within a Christian expression of engaging with God's big, beautiful world.

It was an extremely vibrant place creatively. My friends and I all played in bands and one of my roommates was in an improv comedy group. For the people I sort of moved with, to be a Christian meant you were making things and saying things and shaping things...

Wheaton was very life-giving. For me, it was like an explosion of life. I loved it. And it shaped me.

What was it in mainstream evangelical Christianity that you were most uncomfortable with?

Like the philosopher Arthur Holmes said, 'All truth is God's truth,' but there seemed to be a reticence at times to simply enjoy God's good world – there were so many rules: We can't do this, we can't do that... It seemed to me that faith was much more of a journey than a destination (like, 'We believe the right things. We're in'). There was lots of room to hunt and search and explore.

Was there a particular moment when you thought: 'OK, that's it. I'm leaving this behind'?

I have to think about that in terms of my temperament: somewhere within me there was this creative bent that when I was told 'This is how it's done' would think: We can probably do it another way. When we started Mars Hill 13 years ago – I would have been 28 – it was very clear in my mind that we needed to strip away lots and lots of things, to get back to the essence.

Strip away doctrine or strip away paraphernalia?

Oh, paraphernalia. So, let's take the church service, for instance. This person stands up and then that person stands up, and then we do this, and then we sit here and then we sing this song and... Clutter!

What do you think people most need to hear these days?

The human questions that have always been the human

questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? What does it mean to live a full life? And then there are things like how to forgive somebody who has wronged you.

Is there a hunger in US society to hear the answers to such questions, or do you think people are pretty happy with their lives as they are?

I think humans always long for meaning, hope, love, peace – and my observation would be that there are lots of people who have some affinity for Jesus but they go and visit a church and they just can't stomach the sort of package [they're presented with]. Something is said, or there's something in the air, they just can't deal with. They're 'I want more of this Jesus, I want to be part of a Jesus community, but I can't do that. Is there some church I can be a part of?' I hear that quite a bit.

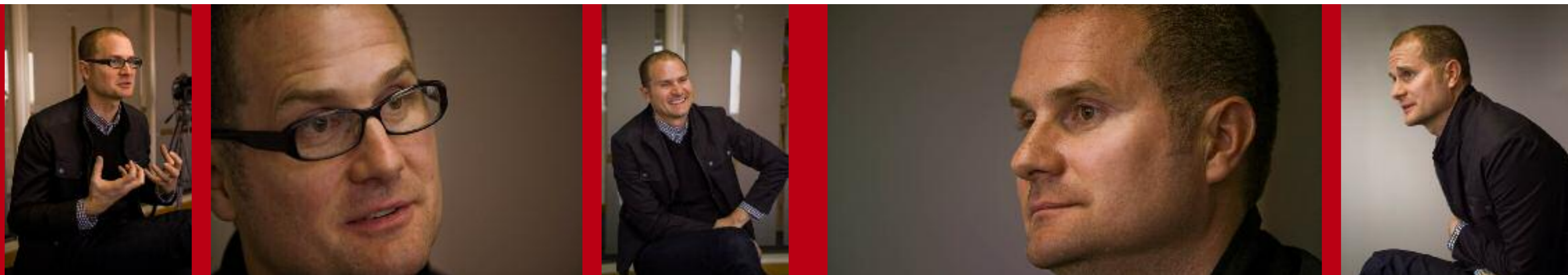
Did you establish Mars Hill to meet the requirements of those sort of people?

I think I created it to meet my need, with the assumption that there were others like me.

Why do you think you're considered controversial?

Yes, that's always a hard question...

I found Jesus compelling, but church didn't seem very interesting to me. If Jesus is who Christians say he is, church should be riveting. You should be on the edge of your seat.



Photographs Andrew Firth

Do you try to stir things up by exaggerating sometimes? I mean, you wouldn't get onto the cover of *Time* if you were presenting a traditional message, would you? Controversy attracts attention – and it sells.

You know, stirring up controversy doesn't interest me. For me, whether I'm working on a sermon or a book or a film or whatever, it has always been: What is the image, the metaphor, the story I'm working with? What is the compelling thing in this text, that is lighting me up and might help somebody else? As a pastor, I meet lots of people who have all sorts of fascinating questions and if in this sort of search, or study or hunt, I stumble across something that I think helps answer their question, great! But the idea of, like, 'How can I stir up controversy?' isn't compelling or interesting. I don't think it's a noble goal and it is never my intent.

One of the things that I do in *Love Wins*² is point out this incredibly expansive phrase 'all things' which is used again and again and again. In Matthew, Jesus talks about the renewal of all things; in Acts 3 there is the restoration of all things, in Colossians 1 there's the reconciliation of all things, in Ephesians Paul mentions all things [being 'summed up' in Christ].³ The writers didn't have to use that phrase. Apparently, God's intentions are to put everything back together through this Christ.

You must have known that that would be controversial, given that you were saying things that conflict with what most Christians understand as orthodoxy.

I think that what happens when you live with an idea for a while is that maybe at first it's, like, 'Whoa, that's new!', but then it moves from [being] new to normal to natural, and then it's just how you see the world. And I always understood that our tradition is wide – it has lots of room for diversity, lots of room for discussion.

In the book, you say that the third-century theologian Origen promoted this idea. He wasn't part of the mainstream, was he? In the sixth century, the Church declared him and his 'impious' writings to be 'anathema'. Yeah. He was not universally loved.

But you claim that he's part of the mainstream.

Origen said that, given enough time, everybody will be won over to God. Now, my experience as a pastor is that there are people who have these sorts of questions: they

read 'all things' and they say, 'What does that mean?' And to point out to them that there are people like Origen is extremely helpful. They're not the first person to wonder about this, or the first person to long for this.

In my experience, people don't want anything to do with Jesus because they think 'Yeah, but what about *that*?' and when they find out that their question or their doubt or their impulse is present within the tradition, it's incredibly helpful. It sets people free, when often-times they're in a tradition or a church that tells them: There's no room for that.

To be fair, Christians have had many crazy ideas over the past 2,000 years and they're not all valid just because someone has articulated them.

Correct. That's correct. Well said.

But you seem to think that it does validate them.

Not the crazy ones.

The question behind your question is: What *is* orthodoxy? I think we'll probably be discussing that forever.

When you are challenged on your theology, you stress your commitment to 'orthodox, historic Christianity'. Why is it so important to you to be orthodox?

There is a community of people who over the centuries have been centred around the crucified and resurrected Christ and have affirmed that through him something unique is happening; and I'm a part of that. There is a historic continuity. There is a tradition that is powerful and centring and grounding.

But why is it good to be orthodox, and bad not to be?

Well, it depends who you're asking.

I'm asking you.

Well, I'm simply saying: I'm part of the historic tradition of people who affirm Jesus. Some people say, 'What exactly do you mean by "affirm"?' Or 'What exactly do you mean by "atonement"?' And you can endlessly parse that out.

There's a kind of cheekiness about you, I can't help feeling, and something a little bit slippery. You know what orthodox teaching is and yet...

Was that cheeky and slippery? I hope not.

You ask very pointed questions. You're a good interviewer! You don't give me one second of...

Respite?

Respite, yes! It's fascinating, because you're friendly but you just keep pushing. But you're smiling. You're enjoying this more than you let on.

If you were a liberal church leader and you said what you are saying, it wouldn't create any stir at all, would it? What makes it controversial is the fact that it's someone from within the evangelical tradition who is saying it.

That's what I've been told, yes – on a great number of occasions. Probably because it's a reflection of my own journey and my own study of the scriptures and experiences with people. It starts with me working out my own faith – with fear and trembling, as they say – being a pastor in a local church and trying to help people with Bible teaching which speaks to them and inspires them and confronts and convicts them in all those redeeming sorts of ways. And then I sort of find out: Oh, this is *here* and this is where *that* fits in...

Were you ever attracted by liberal theology?

Well, I continue to have very real experiences of the resurrected Christ and I see others meeting him, and I believe it. I believe it. I take seriously the open tomb. I take seriously [the notion] that God is at work within human history.

So, what are you saying? That for that reason you don't find liberalism attractive?

I'm trying to answer the question.

At a very straightforward level, I believe in Jesus and I believe he saves people and I believe he sets them free and I have seen, again and again and again, extraordinary things happen when people trust him.

Stirring up controversy doesn't interest me. Whether I'm working on a sermon or a book or a film or whatever, it has always been: What is the compelling thing in this text that is lighting me up and might help somebody else?

The idea that some people go to heaven and some go to hell is part of the orthodox tradition of the church, and yet you say something different.

No, in the book I argue for that. I talk about heaven and hell and the reality of both, and our choice.

But much of the church's teachings over the centuries you would call 'misguided' and 'toxic', wouldn't you?

What I'm talking about is the people I interact with who were told: 'We here in our church – and, in our church, this select group – we're going to heaven. Every single other person is going to hell.' The number of people who have that sort of rattling around in their heads.

For example, people in our church went to the funeral of a relative who has passed from cancer, let's say, and the pastor says: 'Uncle Bob did not make a profession of faith in our church – I have no record that he said such-and-such, or prayed such-and-such – so I need to tell you that for sure he has gone to hell. He is burning in flames of torment and wrath right now.'

Does anyone actually preach that?

Yes! Yes! Exactly. So, in this moment of grieving this is the one thing the family is told for sure by the spiritual authority of this occasion: 'There is no hope for Uncle Bob.' But he doesn't know that. He has no proof of that.

So, the issue is that this pastor made a judgement without actually knowing how that man stood with God, not whether some people actually do go to hell?

Yes.

What is your answer to the question with which you begin *Love Wins*: Is Gandhi in hell?

I don't know. I am not the Judge. That's the beautiful part about it.

But when you ask the question, you're trying to make people think: He couldn't possibly be, because he did so much good. That's why you picked Gandhi, isn't it?

I think that the reason why the question is so compelling is, this is somebody who did such good.

Right. So, you're prompting people to think you couldn't possibly go to hell if you'd done a lot of good.

That's the power, rhetorically, of the question: every-



thing within you leans in that direction.

So, you're leading them to this idea that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell?

Some would say that.

What would you say?

I would say that there is something within us – or, maybe we could say, in religious people – that desperately wants to be able to make those judgements. And that's God's job.

But Gandhi knew the gospel and he rejected it.

Didn't he say, 'I'm compelled by Christ but not his followers'?

Then again, when someone told him that if he rejected Christ, none of his good works would count towards his salvation, he told her she was wrong.

Justification by faith is the centre of the Christian faith. Correct.

So, if there is no faith, there is no justification.

Is there a moment when he dies and Christ meets him?

Oh, well... But you must agree that you invoke Gandhi to raise not that particular question – whether God can deal with people in their dying moments – but the issue of the value of goodness as a...

What I find most compelling is this theme that's picked up in the scriptures again and again and again: that God wants everybody to be saved. And when Jesus comes along, his insistence is that God is for us. And then there is this 'all things' again and again. And within the Christian faith [there] have been people who have said: God is for all of us. God is for Gandhi. Christ died for Gandhi.

And Hitler, presumably?

And Hitler presumably. And does God sort of give up? Do you get this lifetime and then that's it, sorry, you've made your choice? A number of Christians have said that that doesn't seem consistent with the character of God. And I think that's important to point out.

Point out rather than side with?

Yes.

When Jesus was suffering on the cross, do you think he was experiencing hell?

Yes. I think that is how a lot of Christians over the years have talked about it – in the degree to which he suffers separation and alienation...

But you describe hell almost as facing the consequences of decisions you have made – goodness so shames you that you feel bad. You don't believe that God punishes people, do you? You think people bring it on themselves.

That is the kind of hell I stress in the book. I talk about a God of love who pursues us and wants to know every one of us, and how our resistance and rejection of that have very real consequences that I call 'hell'. Now, the degree to which God punishes as an expression of this love to correct, to restore, in the hope of reconciliation, there's lots of talk of that in scripture, and I affirm that.

Do you have to be careful not to shape your theology according to the spirit of the age?

For sure, for sure. Yes.

What sort of issues do you have to be especially careful about?

One very obvious one is the use of the word 'sin'. I see evil and destruction at a very real level in my own community, and when people say to me, 'I have a problem with words like "sin"; I say: 'No, you don't. We see it all around us all the time.' People say, 'I can't believe in a God of judgement, or a God who gets angry.' Yes, you can. You're furious about the oil spill – you want somebody to do something about that. Greed, rape, sex trafficking, abuse – you actually want a God who will do something about injustice and suffering.

I notice that when you list sins they are generally things secular society also objects to – violence, child abuse, rape, exploitation – whereas the sins Jesus mentions most frequently in Matthew's Gospel are very different: hypocrisy, false prophecy, rejecting him...

Once again, excellent point.

The Bible speaks of 'the offence of the cross.' What is likely to offend people in your presentation of the cross?

That following Jesus involves a death – a death of self, a death of ego: 'I have been crucified with Christ.' You

come to the end of yourself. And deep within all of us is this compulsion to perform, to achieve, rooted in a belief that if I just do enough of that, somehow it'll meet this need I have to feel loved, validated, worthy and so on. And the cross says, very offensively: 'No, you are loved exactly as you are. And all of that is rubbish.'

A lot of *Love Wins* is taken up with raising questions – 350 of them, according to one reviewer. Is there a danger of turning faith into an ever-expanding mass of unanswered questions?

Yes, there's always that danger. But then the other end of the spectrum is sort of 'Yes. No. For sure,' straightforward, black-and-white – which doesn't leave anywhere for those questions about mystery.

With all your questions, have you never been tempted to become a liberal Christian?

I don't exactly know what you mean by 'liberal'...

I could give you a book.

Now you're being cheeky! That's cheeky and slippery right there!

You have been described as 'a rock-star evangelist'...

Well, that's unfortunate. You know, I'm a pastor and for me it's about real people in the real world and trying to help them find this Christ and follow him and find life there. That's how I see it, and how it works out in my life. If I can share with others some of the things that I'm learning, the ways that I'm growing and the ways God is challenging me and shaping me, that's an extraordinary thing to be a part of. When somebody else sees the same thing you saw and it sort of lights *them* up, it's terribly rewarding.

Those sorts of labels and such, I don't quite know what to do with.

According to the puff on the back of *Love Wins*, you 'speak to sold-out crowds across the world.' Would you like to play the kind of role Billy Graham once played?

I love what I'm doing right now. It brings me great joy. I'd love to keep making things, keep sharing them with people, and to be a good dad, a good husband. It begins by being grounded with my family and the town we live in, driving my kids to school and picking them up and all that. I really love doing this, and if it helps people, great; but some sort of larger role – my screen blanks.

In the end, what is it you want your ministry to achieve?

At a young age, I had a profound experience of the resurrected Christ. It meant something – he meant something – and he's been with me *ever since*. I understand that, in this modern, rational, enlightened age, 'Jesus loves me' can sound incredibly childish and... *c'mon!* But I actually believe it. □

1 'The early church claimed that all truth is God's truth wherever it be found,' *All Truth is God's Truth* (Eerdmans, 1977), p8

2 *Love Wins: At the heart of life's big questions* (Collins, 2011). The US edition is subtitled 'A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived'.
3 Matthew 19:28; Acts 3:21; Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 1:10

4 Often quoted as 'I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ' – but very possibly apocryphal



BIOGRAPHY

Rob Bell was born in 1970 in Michigan. He was educated at [name of Rob's high school] and studied psychology at Wheaton College, graduating in 1992.

At college, he sang and played guitar in the indie rock band ___ Ton Bundle, but it broke up after he contracted viral meningitis.

He moved to Pasadena to pursue a vocation to teach and gained a master's degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. He served as a youth intern at Calvary Church.

In 1995, he formed a new band, Big Fil, which played a style they called 'Northern Gospel'. They released two CDs, *Big Fil* (1996) and *Via de la Shekel* (1997).

In 1999, Bell founded Mars Hill Bible Church (the name alludes to Acts 17:19–23). Over a thousand people turned up on the day it opened; six months later, the congregation had grown to 4,000. Initially, they met in a school gym in Wyoming, but within a year the church had been given a shopping mall in Grandville and had bought the surrounding land. By 2011, some 8–9,000 people were attending the two Sunday-morning 'gatherings'.

He is the author of *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian faith* (2005), *Sex God* (2007), *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (2008), *Drops like Stars* (2009) and *Love Wins* (2011).

Since 2006, his lecture tours have filled ??? venues across North America. His lectures titled 'Everything is Spiritual', 'The Gods Aren't Angry' and 'Drops Like Stars' have all been released on DVD. He is also the featured speaker on a series of short films the 'Nooma' series of short films.

In 2007, readers of the online magazine TheChurchReport.com voted him the 10th most influential Christian in the United States.

This year, *Time* included him in its '100' list of the world's most influential people and also featured him on its cover.

He has been married since 19?? and has two sons.

This interview was conducted on April 18, 2011.

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