

Judged in righteousness: Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22

by [Kelly Lyn Logue](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

On the night before Thanksgiving, a clergy friend and I went to hear maverick preacher Rob Bell, who is touring the country on his “The Gods Aren’t Angry Tour.” Most folks were home dressing their turkeys, but an interesting crowd of baby boomers, Generation X pastors like me, punk “throw back to the ’80s”-looking young adults, and high school-age teenagers were gathering at Meymandi Hall in Raleigh, North Carolina, to hear this geeky-yet-hip pastor, teacher and writer speak for two hours straight about the history of religion. It was fascinating.

And I haven’t been able to shake it since.

Somehow, in his black button-down shirt, black sweater vest, black jeans, New Balance tennis shoes and wide, white belt, this dude had rock star appeal—it was evident in the standing ovation and whoops and hollers he received. But it wasn’t like clapping for the great preachers at a preaching conference or even for Billy Graham. It was more like the combined energy of an Indigo Girls concert and an ethics lecture by Stanley Hauerwas. We were caught up in the strange fire-like feeling that we had just heard real truth and needed to go to a bar to talk it out.

Through reductionist history, Bell made a case for how humans invented religion—specifically, the altar system of sacrifice—to make themselves feel better. And while more time was given to the story of Abraham than to the story of Jesus that night, the gospel message was clear. Without even recounting the crucifixion, Bell presented such vivid images of the patterns of sacrifice in the ancient Near East (the cultural setting for the sacrifice of Isaac) that by the time we got to the story of Jesus, our hearts and minds were connecting the dots. Jesus’ suffering, his willing sacrifice of his own life on the cross, and his resurrection put an end for all time to our groping attempts to earn our connection to God through blood sacrifice. “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (1 Pet. 3:18).

Like Paul standing in front of the court of the Areopagus, Rob Bell called attention to the extreme and unhelpful religiosity of the current day. Idolatry. Altars to an

unknown God. Today just as then, we are eager to make ourselves right with the gods, to build altars and to offer sacrifices. But our offerings are not living sacrifices of praise in union with Christ's offering for us. Instead, we keep sacrificing ourselves and our sisters and brothers, sending more and more women and men off to war to kill and be killed on an altar draped in the American flag. Some of us even insist on sacrificing ourselves by working 60-, 70-, 80-hour weeks in the church ("for the good of the kingdom," we convince ourselves) as if God could love us more.

Bell told modern blood-shedding stories, true accounts of suicide attempts and self-destructive behaviors like cutting. All of which begs the question: In the 21st century, has humanity advanced at all? Not really. The altars may be more disguised than the crude mountaintop altars of former days, but they are still present. Not much has changed. We just keep sacrificing ourselves, pouring our lifeblood out in poisonous addiction to food, harmful substances and consumerism.

The most prophetic (thus most controversial) thing Bell said that November night was that if the worship we are participating in on Sunday mornings is making us feel bad about ourselves, then it is not Christian worship. You could hear the mouths dropping in shock. Members of this audience live in the Bible Belt, for goodness' sake! Didn't he know his audience? Maybe he didn't know that our people complain about not hearing *enough* about hell and damnation. I wanted to jump out of my seat with an Amen! But I remained silent because many of my parishioners were scattered throughout the hall. I didn't want my unsentimental image to be tarnished. But my heart sang!

The incarnation of God in Jesus means that even as we search for God, "Indeed he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). We can't make God come any closer to us. In Jesus, God lives in the flesh and redeems the human condition. The unmerited gift of the grace of God in spite of our rotten selves just seems too good to be true. Of course, it is too good to be true—that's what makes it so amazing.

We don't have to live as if God is angry with us. The God in whom "we live and move and have our being" does not need anything from us (Acts 17:28, 25). Our baptismal covenant reminds us that to be incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation is a gift from God, offered to us without price.

We belong to a God "who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24). We are not judged by a deity far removed from us. For in Christ, the world is judged in righteousness, not in anger (Acts 17:31). We are

judged not by the virtue of any sacrifice we can make, but by the virtue of Christ's gracious sacrifice for us. How can this be? St. Paul says that we can be assured of this promise because Jesus is risen from the dead (Acts 17:31). Alleluia!