

Rob Bell discusses themes in new book with New York audience

by [R. Kevin Johnson](#)

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NEW YORK (ABP) -- On the eve of the release of his controversial book on hell, Rob Bell sat on stage March 14 opposite *Newsweek* editor Lisa Miller under a wood-etching that read, "The Place Where People Meet to Seek the Highest is Holy Ground."

Dressed in black denim and high-top sneakers, Bell stood and faced the crowd who gathered Monday night at New York's Society for Ethical Culture on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The cameras that connected those streaming via Internet were rolling as he spoke.

"I believe that God is love," he began, "and I believe that Jesus came to show us this love, to give us this love, to teach us about this love, so that we could live in this love and then we could extend it to others."

It is difficult for a moment to believe that the soft-spoken man who uttered these words is the same who has been at the center of the latest controversy of Christian orthodoxy and a frequent mention in the blogosphere for the past two weeks.

Bell, 40, is pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church (a Grand Rapids mega-church) and a prolific author. He is also the creator of the popular video series entitled "NOOMA."

Bell has stirred much interest since the introduction of a viral video to the Internet two weeks ago. The video introduces Bell's new book, [*Love Wins: Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*](#), and created so much immediate interest that HarperOne, the publisher of the book, decided to move up the release date by two weeks.

The video offers a new way to think about eternity and questions the ultimate fate of Gandhi, implying that he too may be among the redeemed, and gives opportunity for Bell to wonder aloud if the message that is often conveyed in Christianity is that Jesus was sent to save sinners from the wrath of God and eternal damnation (rather than from sin). That message, he said, is one that keeps millions from wanting to have anything to do with Christianity.

This three-minute video inspired other popular figures of evangelical Christianity to respond. John Piper tweeted, simply, "Farewell, Rob Bell." Reformed Pastor Kevin DeYoung penned a 20-page diatribe that, by its length alone shows the vehement concern in the orthodox community over Bell's ideas. Other writers went a little easier on the pastor. Greg Boyd blogged, "Rob Bell is NOT a Universalist (and I actually read Love Wins)."

"I never set out to be controversial," Bell said. "I actually don't think it's a noble goal."

"I don't think that God honors it when people set out to be to be shocking or dangerous or provocative," he said. "My interest is in what's true and where is the light and where is the heart and what inspires."

Many who came seeking answers to specific questions may have left a bit frustrated. Throughout the hour-long interview, Bell seemed purposely, and characteristically, vague. Met with a question about physical heaven and the location of those presently who have died, he responded that there is endless speculation about that and said "it's very important to not turn speculation into dogma."

In an effort to answer the question that everyone was waiting to hear, Miller asked Bell specifically, "Are you a universalist?"

"No," he said, "if by 'universalist' we mean there's a giant cosmic arm that sweeps everybody in at some point whether you want to be there or not." Bell went on to explain that the love he espouses involves a God who would never violate free will. God, he said, is one of love, and love involves choice and freedom.

Bell's caveat is that there will be all sorts of different kinds of people in heaven, citing passages where Jesus warned that "all the people who are in might be out and all the people who are out might be in."

Regarding hell, Bell explained that he believes in hell because he sees it around him every day through the human suffering in the world. He further said that he sees no reason that hell will not be extended into eternity.

In the final moments of the discussion, a question came from the audience regarding the Great Commission and what is the responsibility of Christians given Bell's views. He responded that there is a biblical mandate that has been adopted by evangelical Christians and churches, and that mandate is to proclaim God's love to everyone and invite those people into community with other Christians.

While there are many who attend church each week and participate in the activities that are expected of them, they nevertheless have no real understanding of what faith is, how to practice faith, and how to share the great story of salvation.

The challenge then for Christians regarding evangelism, Bell said, is whether or not Christians believe that the story really is great enough to tell.