

Gen-Next preacher: Chatting with Rob Bell

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

You've traveled across the U.S. and the United Kingdom on speaking tours. Who comes out for a lecture by Rob Bell?

A full spectrum—people who worship each week, Jewish rabbis and Buddhists, and people who say their friends will never set foot in church but who come because I happen to be speaking in their town.

You grew up in an evangelical church. What stands out for you in that experience?

When I was growing up, some people were taught that authority comes from how loud one yells the propositions. “Here are the nine things that are true,” for example—and they would say them over and over until people assented to them. Others were raised to believe that all that matters is believing in your heart that Jesus is the Savior, Messiah, Son of God.

Jesus uses a metaphor with the Pharisees—that you have strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel. For many people in our culture, the church has spent extraordinary energy focused on things that feel like gnats. They are not the weightier matters of the law.

What is the core of the biblical message as communicated at Mars Hill Church?

I think that today many people are realizing that the highest value in the scriptures isn't a proposition, but the incarnation, the reality of the One who puts flesh and blood on the divine. The incarnation, the kingdom of God, is exploding here and now, in this place. God wants not only to put me back together, but to do this for all of creation. That's a beautiful thing. Too many people are stuck in outdated terms like left and right and conservative and liberal. The question is what does the kingdom of God look like for this neighborhood or this person.

Another tradition, often associated with the mainline, believes that what matters is doing something about the great causes of our day, from hunger to disease to poverty. The beautiful and historic thing that's happening is that people from across the religious spectrum are realizing that these are all dimensions of what happens when heaven crashes into earth.

How does Mars Hill talk about the kingdom of God in practical ministries?

We often talk of our desire that the church be the unquestionable force for good in the world. Many people don't have drinking water, 46 million Americans don't have health insurance, and people are dying in Africa from HIV/AIDS. Our authority comes from our engagement with the greatest suffering of the downcast.

In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that they are to leave a portion of their fields and harvests for the orphan, the widow and the stranger among them because, God says, I'm the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt. So our redemption experience is deeply tied to extending our redemption experience to others. God says, I know how you are. You're going to forget Egypt and how I rescued you. You're going to forget your own liberation narrative unless you're endlessly extending generosity to the widow, the orphan and the stranger among you. And so God connects personal salvation with acts of justice, compassion and mercy.

Is Mars Hill an Emergent church?

I don't use that word; I don't find it terribly helpful. If *Emergent* refers to a conversation among serious Christians who are wrestling with what it means to be the disciples of Jesus, then I'm all for it. But I chafe against capital E-*Emergent* as a label, a brand or an exclusive new kind of denomination. Some of our brothers and sisters who are more enslaved to fear use Emergent for anything that's new or uncomfortable.

Mars Hill Church grew quickly. How do you keep up with the growth, the ministries, the programs?

Not very well. We've been swamped and have played catch-up from day one. But we believe our responsibility is to create an environment in which people can take the next step in their journey, whatever that looks like.

We help connect people with other people who are also taking the next step. And then we engage them with the great causes of our day. So we have tried to create the kind of environment in which people can do that. Otherwise, fast growth and lots of people is not sustainable—you can't hire enough people to care for all these people.

We embrace a biblical understanding of a staff's purpose as simply to empower the body to do the work of ministry. We believe that every person is a priest with a particular ministry. One family in our church that lives in an underresourced neighborhood started an after-school tutoring program for kids who are struggling. A 70-year-old nurse in our church who's tutoring realized that many people in her neighborhood have never had any basic health care testing. She began doing it for free. She's one of our priests.

Who provides basic pastoral functions, such as those for counseling, funerals, weddings?

The job of one woman on our staff is to connect people with priests. She has a team of people in the congregation who are wired for mercy and eager to visit the sick. Other people love the whole wedding thing—premarriage counseling and so on—so we have licensed people to do weddings. We assume that the body will take care of itself and that the staff's job is to enlist and empower and encourage.

The theme of your book *Velvet Elvis* is that Christianity has to be rethought and reimagined by each succeeding generation. Is Mars Hill poised for the reimaginings of the next generation?

I think it may be. I recently visited our Tuesday-night event for junior high students. The team of leaders had turned the evening into a talk show about the Latin roots of the word culture, where the word comes from and what it means to engage and shape culture. They set up a talk show with a host who altered what would have been a monologue about the gospel and culture and presented it in this new format. It was unbelievably engaging, and the students were right with him. Seventh graders were wrestling with ideas about how culture shapes and is shaped. The creative possibilities give hope that we'll continue to imagine in new ways.

How do you deal with the pressures and dangers of celebrity?

Well, this morning I woke up, fixed my boys' breakfast, made their lunches and walked them to school. Recently we moved across the street from some friends so

that we could live in community with each other. We're sharing an epic meal tonight, and we'll laugh and tell stories and celebrate the life that God has given us. So for me everything begins with the divine in the daily. If you can't find God in the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and the dinner with beloved friends from across the street, then I don't know if God will be found on the mountaintop. If I lose the sense of wonder about today and this afternoon and this evening, then there's no point in spouting off about how to fix things. For me, that's what it's all about.