

Pastor Stirs Wrath With His Views on Old Questions

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

A new book by one of the country's most influential evangelical pastors, challenging traditional Christian views of heaven, hell and eternal damnation, has created an uproar among evangelical leaders, with the most ancient of questions being argued in a biblical hailstorm of [Twitter](#) messages and blog posts.

In a book to be published this month, the pastor, Rob Bell, known for his provocative views and appeal among the young, describes as “misguided and toxic” the dogma that “a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better.”

Such statements are hardly radical among more liberal theologians, who for centuries have wrestled with the seeming contradiction between an all-loving God and the consignment of the billions of non-Christians to eternal suffering. But to traditionalists they border on heresy, and they have come just at a time when conservative evangelicals fear that a younger generation is straying from unbendable biblical truths.

Mr. Bell, 40, whose Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., has 10,000 members, is a Christian celebrity and something of a hipster in the pulpit, with engaging videos that sell by the hundreds of thousands and appearances to rapt, youthful crowds in rock-music arenas.

His book comes as the evangelical community has embraced the Internet and social media to a remarkable degree, so that a debate that once might have built over months in magazines and pulpits has instead erupted at electronic speed.

The furor was touched off last Saturday by a widely read Christian blogger, Justin Taylor, based on promotional summaries of the book and a [video](#) produced by Mr. Bell. In his blog, [Between Two Worlds](#), Mr. Taylor said that the pastor “is moving farther and farther away from anything resembling biblical Christianity.”

“It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine,” wrote Mr. Taylor, who is vice president of Crossway, a Christian publisher in Wheaton, Ill.

By that same evening, “Rob Bell” was one of the top 10 trending topics on Twitter. Within 48 hours, Mr. Taylor's original blog had been viewed 250,000 times. Dozens of other Christian leaders and bloggers jumped into the fray and thousands of their readers posted comments on both sides of the debate, though few had yet seen the entire book.

One leading evangelical, John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, wrote, “Farewell Rob Bell.” R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said in a [blog post](#) that by suggesting

that people who do not embrace Jesus may still be saved, Mr. Bell was at best toying with heresy. He called the promotional video, in which Mr. Bell pointedly asks whether it can be true that Gandhi, a non-Christian, is burning in hell, “the sad equivalent of a theological striptease.”

Others such as Scot McKnight, a professor of theology at North Park University in Chicago, said they welcomed the renewed discussion of one of the hardest issues in Christianity — can a loving God really be so wrathful toward people who faltered, or never were exposed to Jesus? In an interview and on his [blog](#), he said that the thunder emanating from the right this week was not representative of American Christians, even evangelicals. According to surveys and his experience with students, Mr. McKnight said, a large majority of evangelical Christians “more or less believe that people of other faiths will go to heaven,” whatever their churches and theologians may argue.

“Rob Bell is tapping into a younger generation that really wants to open up these questions,” he said. “He is also tapping into the fear of the traditionalists — that these differing views of heaven and hell will compromise the Christian message.”

Mr. Bell, who through his publisher declined to comment on the book or the debate, has resisted labels, but he is often described as part of the so-called emerging church movement, which caters to younger believers and has challenged theological boundaries as well as pastoral involvement in conservative politics.

As the controversy exploded last week, HarperOne moved up to March 15 the publication date of Mr. Bell’s book, “Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.”

Judging from an advance copy, the 200-page book is unlikely to assuage Mr. Bell’s critics. In an elliptical style, he throws out probing questions about traditional biblical interpretations, mixing real-life stories with scripture.

Much of the book is a sometimes obscure discussion of the meaning of heaven and hell that tears away at the standard ideas. In his version, heaven is something that begins here on earth, in a life of goodness, and hell seems more a condition than an eternal fate — “the very real consequences we experience when we reject all the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us.”

While sliding close to what critics consider the heresy of “universalism” — that all humans will eventually be saved — he never uses the term.

Mark Galli, senior managing editor of Christianity Today, called in an [article](#) on the magazine's Web site for all sides to temper their rhetoric and welcome more debate.

“We won’t be able to discern where the Spirit is leading if we don’t listen and respond respectfully to one another,” he wrote.

“God once used a donkey to make his will known,” he added, “so surely he is able to speak through both traditionalists and gadflies.”

Heaven, Hell, and Rob Bell: Putting the Pastor in Context

He's not the first to try to resolve old biblical tensions in new ways.

Mark Galli | posted 3/02/2011 11:19AM

If your God is perfect and all powerful and loving, then why does he not give everyone on this earth a fair chance to know him and accept him? An example of this is a kid in Iran born into a Muslim extremist family and taught that Islam is the one true religion and that Christianity is a lie. These kids do not get a fair chance at knowing God, and they go to hell and suffer for it eternally. That is extremely unfair, and if that is the case, God is not perfect but cruel.

This recent letter to *Christianity Today* suggests some of the issues at the heart of this week's blogosphere explosion over Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*.

In case you've been living in a cave without Wi-Fi, one popular blogger who read a couple of advance chapters of Bell's latest book, announced that Bell was probably a universalist. This set Twitter on fire with both speculation and condemnation. One famous Reformed theologian simply tweeted, "Farewell, Rob Bell." One does not imagine that he had kicked Bell out of the Reformed theology club. Bell hasn't been considered a member in good standing for some time. Now, the tweet implies, Bell is no longer evangelical, or orthodox, or maybe even Christian.

A great many of the responses to Bell assume that there is only one right way to think about the destiny of people who do not put their trust in Christ in this life: they will experience eternal, conscious punishment in hell. Despite the cultural stereotypes, people don't think this because they are cruel and vindictive, because they relish the thought of people roasting in hell. No, they are trying to take seriously the teaching of Scripture, especially the words of Jesus. As Tim Keller has pointed out, Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. So if you take Jesus seriously, you are going to have to take hell seriously.

This view has become the standard among contemporary evangelicals. Two evangelical books that have rested comfortably on the *New York Times* bestseller list are *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan and *Radical* by David Platt. Both are ardent pleas for more committed, sacrificial devotion to Christ and love for the world. And both motivate readers with the occasional mention of the huge numbers of people across the world who have yet to hear the gospel. For example, Platt notes anxiously "the 4.5 billion people, who ... at this moment are separated from God in their sin and (assuming nothing changes) will spend an eternity in hell."

Many faithful, devout Christians, then, assume the scenario criticized by the CT letter writer. But not all, and what is being lost in the anxious chatter is that faithful, devout Christians try to reconcile the love of God with the judgment of God in a number of ways. Many evangelicals who hold to the standard view assume, as one prominent blogger wrote yesterday, that the Bible's teaching on this is "clear." But especially in the last century, things don't seem that clear to many of the devout.

To keep this article from wandering too far afield, let's talk about one of a constellation of theological issues raised in this discussion: the fate of the person who has heard the gospel portrayed fairly, lovingly, and clearly, and yet refuses to respond in faith.

From Universalism to Annihilationism

The standard view has much to commend it, especially the words of Jesus. As Keller points out, he spoke of "eternal fire and punishment" as the final destination of both angels and human beings who reject God (Matt. 25:41, 46). He says that those who succumb to sin will be in danger of the "fire of hell" (Matt. 5:22; 18:8-9). He depicted hell as painful fire and "outer darkness" (Matt. 25:30), a place of terrible misery and unhappiness. Add to this the logic of God's holiness and the radical evil of sin and so forth, and you have a compelling

argument for eternal, conscious punishment. No wonder it has been the nearly unquestioned doctrine of the church from the beginning.

Still, the question is not whether Jesus or the rest of the New Testament teaches judgment and hell. Even the earliest well-known universalist, Origen, didn't deny that some sort of painful judgment, even if not eternal, would be required of those who did not submit to God. What some Christians struggle with is the equally relevant teachings of Jesus and Paul regarding God's justice and mercy. How could a perfectly just God punish someone for eternity for a mere 70 years of sin? And how do we understand the many verses that seem to teach universal salvation? Like "in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Like "as one trespass led to condemnation for all people, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life *for all people*" (Rom. 5:18). Like Jesus' statement, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all people* to myself" (John 12:32).

So over the centuries, alternatives to the standard view have cropped up here and there, and no more so in the last couple of centuries.

As noted, on one end of the spectrum is universalism—the belief that all people will eventually be saved. But this is not necessarily a sentimental universalism, where God simply lets bygones be bygones. The period of suffering and torment may take eons, but eventually even the most notorious sinner—even Satan himself—will be restored to God, but only as through fire. Various forms of this view have been ascribed to early church theologians, like Gregory of Nyssa (though Eastern theologians dispute this), and even to evangelical heroes like devotional writer William Law (most famous for his *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*) and pastor and fantasy writer George MacDonald. William Barclay was also a universalist; though he was clearly a liberal, his commentaries on the New Testament were widely and profitably used by evangelicals for decades.

That being said, universalism has been a decidedly minority view in church history and contemporary evangelicalism. CT's statement of faith (signed by all editors annually) is more or less standard in our world, and is unequivocally non-universalist: "At the end of the age ... the righteous shall enter into the full possession of eternal bliss in the presence of God, and the wicked shall be condemned to eternal death."

Still, it is only fair to acknowledge that a handful of devout Christians, many of whom evangelicals respect, have solved the judgment/salvation tension by affirming that, yes, unbelievers will endure punishment, but it will not be eternal (though it may last a very long time).

Second, we have those Christians who affirm eternal punishment, but who don't believe it is experienced consciously. John R. W. Stott and others have tried to reconcile the seemingly universalistic texts in the New Testament with the reality of hell by exploring annihilationism, the idea that the impenitent will be destroyed in hell.

When liberal English historian David Edwards accused evangelicals of believing in a God who is the "Eternal Torturer," Stott responded by carefully trying to define what we mean by "hell."

"We need to survey the biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilation," he wrote, "and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture."

Biblical passages about hell, says Stott, use the language of destruction, and "it would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed." The idea of an indestructible immortal soul, Stott noted, is a Greek concept, "not a biblical concept."

Stott said that the texts that seem to hope for universal salvation do not lead him to universalism "because of the many others which speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment."

Still, Stott hesitated to dogmatize because of his respect for the tradition and because he did not want to divide the worldwide evangelical community.

Other leading Christians have taught or have been open to some form of annihilationism. C. S. Lewis, for example, rejected the word "annihilation," because it suggests that nothing would remain. But just as a log which is burnt becomes gases, heat, and ash, he wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, "To have been a log means now being those three things. If a soul can be destroyed, must there not be a state of *having been* a soul?" That state, he wrote, could be called "torment, destruction, and privation." Thinking along those lines helps us accept the doctrine of hell as a moral teaching, says Lewis.

In 1982, Houston lawyer Edward Fudge wrote *The Fire that Consumes*, which has become the standard reference on annihilationism. That book was heartily endorsed by noted New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, who said he did not fit either with the church's traditional teaching on the matter, nor quite fully with Fudge's position. Other noted scholars who supported the book were Clark Pinnock and Greg Boyd.

Evangelicals have long been divided on the value of annihilationism. In May 1989, Regent College theologian J. I. Packer attacked the idea at the Evangelical Affirmations conference held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In the discussion that followed, Reformed Seminary theologian Roger Nicole argued that annihilationism should be respected as a persistent and biblical minority position among historic evangelicals. Nicole's speech effectively defeated a motion that would have defined annihilationists as outside the evangelical camp.

Another answer, increasingly popular, is to live with the biblical tension. The verses on eternal judgment and universal reconciliation, some say, stand in an irreconcilable paradox. How it will all be resolved remains a mystery known to God alone. Even someone like Karl Barth, whose theology pushed strongly in the direction of universalism, adamantly refused to go there: "Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction, we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift." He could even say, "To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance." Like theologian Emil Brunner, he was content to let the paradox stand, all the while affirming that universal salvation remains an open possibility for which we may hope. The late Richard Neuhaus, a conservative Roman Catholic whose orthodox credentials can hardly be questioned, once noted that while Roman Catholic doctrine posits a hell, it never actually teaches that anyone is there! While not teaching universal salvation, he also held out hope that it might be true.

Barth, Brunner, and Neuhaus can hardly be put in the witness stand as evangelicals. But as senior managing editor of *Christianity Today* for nearly a dozen years, I have talked with many evangelical pastors and leaders who have said, off the record, that this is more or less their view. Again, a minority view, but popular enough to be noticed by this journalist.

This is not just my observation, nor a recent one. Back in 1978, in a survey of the history of universal salvation in the theological journal *Themelios*, New Testament theologian Richard Bauckham noted:

Until the nineteenth century, almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment. Its advocates among theologians today must be fewer than ever before. The alternative interpretation of hell as annihilation seems to have prevailed even among many of the more conservative theologians. Among the less conservative universal salvation,

either as hope or as dogma, is now so widely accepted that many theologians assume it virtually without argument."

Scot McKnight, theologian, blogger, and author of *The Jesus Creed*, agrees. He believes that two ideas have been quietly permeating evangelical leadership and institutions: pluralism (the notion that many religions can lead to salvation) and universalism. He says we're going to have to address them openly at some point. This underground reality may be one reason that so many have reacted so passionately to even the possibility that a popular teacher and pastor like Rob Bell may be a universalist. They sense the theological ground shifting.

(To be fair, in my reading of an advance copy of Bell's book, I didn't see universalism, though there are statements that lean in that direction. He clearly says that God's love can be "resisted and rejected and denied and avoided," and that doing so "is a form of punishment of its own" and "an increasingly unloving hellish reality." In this respect, he seems to be in company with ideas implicit in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. All told, with his usual assortment of refreshing metaphors and bursts of insight, I found myself appreciating anew both the power and love of God. But he is not a careful writer. Some of his arguments are confusing, and he sometimes is more interested in scoring points than in offering a clear alternative. For example, he assumes that to adopt the standard view of justification is to believe that Jesus is saving us from God—it's compelling rhetoric with an element of truth, but in the end an unfair characterization. But that is a review for another day. Watch for the April issue of CT.)

Make no mistake: there is a lot at stake in the discussion of unbelievers' eternal destiny. But surely we can do better than to prejudge (before reading the book!) or condemn by labeling ("Universalist!" "Liberal!"). The issues raised will not go away by dismissing them as irrational or unfounded or malicious. Love means to believe and hope all things, and that means our first instinct should be to assume good motives by those announcing "new" theological solutions to longstanding conundrums. Maybe they love God as much as, if not more than, we do! Maybe they have as much, if not more, passion to win the lost to Jesus!

This is not to suggest that frank, honest, theological exchange should not take place. It should! But traditionalists need to marshal arguments and not ad hominem. The same goes for the innovators. Some gadfly theologians are notorious for tweaking, even mocking, traditional evangelical doctrines; they delight in scoring cheap shots against received orthodoxy. All well and good, for tradition needs to be tweaked for its own good. But when challenged, these critics often refuse to engage their challengers, and instead suggest that they are rationalists trapped in a modernist mindset and not worthy of engaging!

As Bauckham and McKnight have noted, the ground on this topic has been shifting. The traditional view may well be grounded ever more deeply and solidly as a result of re-engaging this topic. Or it may be altered, as have many doctrines, by rigorous theological discussion. But we won't be able to discern where the Spirit is leading if we don't listen and respond respectfully to one another. God once used a donkey to make his will known, so surely he is able to speak through both traditionalists and gadflies.

Mark Galli is senior managing editor of Christianity Today. Editor-in-chief David Neff supplied the material on annihilationism.