



The Preacher Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest Rob Bell

Writer: Dean Nelson

Rob Bell's new book *Love Wins* was on the cover of a recent edition of *Time Magazine*, sparking a debate about heaven and hell that the culture hasn't seen in decades. When *Risen* met with him just before the release of the book, we decided not to discuss what would obviously be discussed at length elsewhere. Instead, we asked him about creativity, storytelling, imagination, mysticism, and lots of other things he believes in. Even before the recent controversy, he was one of the most electrifying voices in modern Christianity. His Nooma videos are used in churches around the world. Other books of his, such as *Velvet Elvis*, *Sex God*, and *Jesus Wants To Save Christians*, have sold millions of copies. His live tours, such as *Everything Is Spiritual*, *The Gods Aren't Angry*, and *Drops Like Stars* play to sold-out auditoriums. He's the pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., where up to 10,000 people attend on a given weekend. But, as recent events have shown, it's not all a rock-star ride for Bell. Entire websites are dedicated to pointing out what some believe is dangerous thinking and outright heresy. To some, Rob Bell is the scariest man in organized religion.

..... interviewed for *risen magazine* in point loma, california

Risen Magazine: You used to be in a punk rock band called ___-ton Bundle, where you kept changing the first word to fill in the blank. It was a long time ago, but do you remember any lyrics of your songs?

Rob Bell: We had a song called Velvet Elvis (pauses, then begins to recite) ... "and now you hang on a fake wood frame, silver faded beads spell out your name, you're Velvet Elvis. You're the South's own son, you're an Army boy, all that money and all those toys..." [laughs]. I haven't said those lyrics since I was 19!

RM: Impressive! I was just singing that song in the shower this morning! How did you get into the band?

RB: When I was in high school there was the typical hierarchy – there were the great athletes, then the popular kids, then the kids who smoked out in the pine trees across the street from the school that we called "the cone zone," and then there were the drama kids who wore black turtlenecks and were in a perpetual state of emotion about something, and I didn't fit in with any of them. I didn't have a place. All of the conventional outlets were dominated by prettier, smarter, more athletic people. I talked my way into my friend's band – they were auditioning singers – and I had never sung. But I would go to the tryouts and pout and think they would offer me a shot. I had no idea how to sing. It was all a terribly intuitive sort of thing, where we would create something to share with people.

RM: That sounds a little like what you're doing now. Except for the pouting.

RB: Somewhere inside me is this impulse to create things and share them with people. For me there is a straight line from alternative-90s band to preacher – creating things and sharing them. After we created the Mars Hill

church, this massive institution and organization built up around me, with meetings I had to go to, and discussions about how the offerings were yesterday. It almost killed me. I was so bad at leading a big organization. I could mess up a one-car parade. I would sit in these meetings and think "I would love for this meeting to be over so I could get to work." For all the people around me in the meeting, this was their work. For me, though, I was working on a novel in my head.

RM: So while everyone around you was trying to organize this thing you had created, you had already sort of moved on?

RB: In 2006 I did a tour called *Everything is Spiritual*. Imagine leaving a meeting and saying, "I have to leave this meeting because I have this idea on doing a two-hour lecture on physics and dimensional theory that I want to do in punk clubs, and I'm going to need a custom-built 24-foot white board, and I'm going to get on a bus and do it around the country, and somehow it might be meaningful to people." You're not going to get far with that. It's only been in the last three or four years where I've been able to return to making stuff. There are only a few things I know how to do, so I want to do those things.

RM: It seems like your sermons are a kind of art form. You don't just stand up and explicate a scriptural text. You've got a lot of other stuff going on. Would you agree that sermons can be an art form for you?

RB: For many people, sermons raise the provocative question of "When's lunch?" In a lot of churches the sermon got hijacked by a bunch of other impulses, sometimes by something else the church was trying to do. For instance, you just heard a wonderful 30-minute sermon, and at the end there was a seven-minute thing on how we need to raise money for a new addi-

tion. When the sermon became something about everyone pitching in and giving money, you did what to the previous 32 minutes? You made people wonder, “*What was that? We got through the sermon to get to something else?*” Sometimes sermons are propaganda – telling people what they already know so that they’ll feel good about themselves. For some, sermons are inoculated against any kind of new insight or truth -- the sermon has to give the party line – that’s its point.

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RM: But what about the art form?

RB: Think through the minor prophets you read about in scripture: they’re laying on their side, they’re cooking over human waste, they’re tying boards to their backs, they’re marrying prostitutes – there’s a sermon! – and their message has its roots in performance art. They’re doing something and it’s loaded with significance. You get it right away. When Jesus is coming over the Mount of Olives, he curses the fig tree as he’s headed to the temple area. A fig tree to first century Jewish culture was a symbol of spiritual leadership. He’s headed into the center of the spiritual leadership structure and he curses the fig tree – that’s like burning the flag. He is saying, “*This whole system, this religious military economic complex is going down. It’s corrupt and under God’s judgment.*” His disciples knew exactly what he was saying. He didn’t say, “*There are three points I want you to understand.*” It was a moment, and everyone got it. So the sermon has its roots as an art form that opens you up, challenges you, provokes you, educates, teaches, heals and it needs to be reclaimed.

RM: How exactly do you write a sermon?

RB: I start with a biblical text, and I always begin with the assumption that there is something brilliant, beautiful, subversive, gospel in this text. There is SOMETHING HERE. I assume I am going to learn something that is going to erupt, that I am going to have an experience with these living sacred words. Then I ask how can I help people see what I’ve seen? There’s a great story about three disciples who on Sabbath eve would get together with their rabbi and read from this book of creation, and one night the disciples leave the house and are walking home, and the one disciple says, “*I am so sorry – it is clear that the rabbi and I talked the whole night, and you didn’t get a chance to talk to him.*” The second disciple says, “*What are you talking about? I’m the one who should apologize, because it was clear that the rabbi and I talked all night.*” And the third one says, “*The rabbi and I talked all night and it is I who should apologize to you two for taking all of his time.*” Then they all fell silent because they realized what happened. So it is with the sacred text. Each person hears what they need to hear. My interest is in creating a space so the Spirit will speak to you

what you need to hear.

RM: When you speak publicly you make it sound as if you are just discovering this insight in this moment, like something is just now dawning on you. Is that part of the performance art?

RB: From 2001–2009 we made these short films called NOOMAs, and the director would say to me, “*Okay, this scene? Act like you just thought it up.*” People say it seems like I just have stumbled across this idea. And sometimes that’s true! Seriously, though, the structure of the sermon or the video creates a kind of spontaneity. Hopefully in that space people are having their own *AHHHH!* You created that space and people are finding all sorts of things in it.

RM: What were the brainstorming sessions like for your Nooma videos? I had this Seinfeldian picture in my mind, where a bunch of people yell out wacky ideas.

RB: It was unreal. There wasn’t really a model for making a sermon a movie. When we made the first few, lots of people said, *what are you doing? Who would watch this?* Why are you wasting money making these? One guy said the only way it would work is if we put it in the back of a book and people would get it for free.

RM: What a prophetic utterance that was!

RB: People in the church said we needed to capture the sermons in some way for people who can’t come to Grand Rapids. I said “*We have a cassette ministry.*” They said there was a visual dimension that we were missing. I began thinking about how to put a sermon in a cinematic form. The only thing I’d ever seen was filming a church service, and the church became a sort of Studio B. And the camera would always catch someone sleeping. So that wasn’t it. I wanted to present it as scenes and images. Some people in the church started a non-profit thing to figure it out. So we thought about it as film. I wrote a script, and the first one was called *Rain*, where I had my son on my back. We spent hours going over the script, and then I brought in version two, then version three, and around version seven we were ready.

RM: More and more people seem to be turning to film for storytelling. Is that a more effective way to communicate?

RB: It is very powerful and effective. It is a double edged sword, though. Any medium you work with has upsides and downsides. When you combine image and music you are going to a different portion of the brain. You come up to me and say you really loved that film, or you loved that book, those are fundamentally different sorts of engagement.

RM: You said once that you practice Militant Mysticism. What does that mean?

RB: It’s a nice juxtaposition of terms, isn’t it? It’s very important that we preserve the sense that at the heart of our interactions with God there is a profound mystery that we ought to respect. Whole systems of theology and thought and philosophy have been built up where God is A, B, C, D, Roman Numeral I, II, III, IV, and they’ve killed all the wonder and mystery that actually animates and gives us life.

RM: I thought that was your job as a preacher, to explain all this stuff?

RB: There are some things I can explain, and some things I can’t. Part of wisdom is knowing when you are at a place of knowing when to stop, hit pause, and don’t keep talking. Look at the Eucharist, for example. We put this bread in the front, and the cup, and we invite you to come. You may have an





experience with the resurrected Christ that might be quite difficult to put into words. When we try to analyze that too much, we miss out on the fact that fundamentally it is an experience to be enjoyed rather than be analyzed.

RM: But don't you think a lot of people go to church to have their beliefs reinforced instead of brought into a mystery?

RB: I don't know that it's an either/or. There's a wonderful place for the mind, and linear thought and rational thinking where A leads to B leads to C. That's one of the ways we are wired, and certain people connect there. But there are also certain truths that are hard to put into words. In late 2008 my wife and I were 38, with a 9 year old and 11 year old, and my wife told me she was pregnant. So in early '09 she wakes up one night and she can't breathe. We go to the emergency room and she can't breathe, and the doctors seem to be making up terms for what she's going through, like pregnancy-induced asthma. Literally one doctor who has delivered thousands of babies said he didn't know what she had. But she could not get enough air. So in the last three months of pregnancy she was confined to a chair and a breathing tube, and a few times a day her lungs would close up and I thought I was going to lose her. We have two boys, and when she gave birth and it was this girl, and the nurse immediately put her on my wife's chest, could I put that experience into words? My wife's okay, the baby's okay. Even talking about it today is difficult. My experience is that there are lots of things that happen where words fail. That's important to keep in mind as people of faith. There is a time when we need more words and a time when we need fewer words. There's a time when you lean in and all come together and say, "How do we name this and analyze this and try to figure out what this is?" and other times when the wisest thing to do is draw a circle and say, "Let's stand around the circle, but no one step in there because that is what it is and let's let it be."

RM: *Time* magazine called you the next Billy Graham, but a pastor at another Mars Hill Church in another part of the country called you a heretic. What's up with that?

RB: If I were to read the Gospel for the first time, if I was stuck in a hotel room and I opened up a Bible and I read the story of Jesus for the first time and somebody asked me what the story was about, one of the things I might say is "Hub. It seems like the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes love this guy, and it seems like the religious establishment is scared to death of him." I think it's necessary to take ideas, philosophies and theologies and look at them closely. That bothers some people. Also when we know that 300 million people in sub-Saharan Africa will die of HIV and AIDS, and every six seconds someone dies, and 80 percent of the world lives in substandard housing, and about half of the world lives on less than two American dollars a day, and a million people committed suicide last year, in the face of the kind of suffering we have in the world, as a follower of Jesus you wake up in the morning, and the very best use of your energies is tearing apart other believers? I begin to wonder if some Christians need to be saved. Also, I'm not saying anything new. The historic Orthodox Christian stream is wide and diverse. That's part of its strength. There's lots of room. Is this somehow an accusation of some new radical heresy? No. It is ignorance of the tradition of which we are a part, which ought to be celebrated, not castigated. One other thing? Never Google your name.

RM: You take some pretty hefty criticism. Does it bother you?

RB: To be honest with you, it has nothing to do with my life. I don't debate, respond to hate emails, I don't think you've ever heard me say something

unkind or derisive about another leader. My wife and I try to be good neighbors to our friends and I try to love my wife and kids and I wake up each morning and think "What's the next thing I ought to create and try to share with people?" That's where I live, and apparently there is some kind of Christian echo chamber out there of people who are quite riled by this. Someone said there is somebody in Australia giving seminars against me, and I'm like, "You're welcome!" I'm putting somebody's kids through college! It's fascinat-

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ing! I think it's important to ask, "Are you going to contribute and try and help or are you someone on the sidelines throwing rocks?" The criticism provides an invitation to become bitter and throw rocks back and become a person who has lost the plot. It also invites you to let it break you and humble you and mold you. If you're willing to go there, you come out the other side hopefully a more expansive, loving, kind person. For my wife and me the criticism usually comes indirectly. Somebody comes up and says, "Hey I want you to know what so and so said, but we're completely behind you." That's what I call a chocolate-covered turd. The intention was wonderful.

RM: But once you bit into it...

RB: The big question is whether you'll allow it to shape you into the kind of person who has the kind of heart that God has--to love your enemies, to be that wide and open. That's the real invitation. That's where things get interesting.

RM: One of the things YOU have been critical of is Christian art, Christian music, Christian fiction, why?

RB: Biblically, the word Christian is a noun, and it emerges in the New Testament as people who follow Jesus. So it's people. When it becomes an adjective in order to make things safe and palatable, that isn't something you find in the Scriptures. It creates a second standard where you can create things that are mediocre, but because they have a fish or praying hands or a dove on them, they're okay. I don't think that's the best witness to the world. If you're an actor, be a great actor. If you're a sculptor, be a great sculptor. If you write, write great things, and that is your act of worship. Creation, as Paul said, is good. It's already blessed. It doesn't need a bunch of things attached to it. We say, "Bless these things" and God says, "I took care of that. You just go make great stuff." ∞