

**The Oprahfication of Rob Bell?
The Question of Desire, Resistance and the Megachurch Culture of Celebrity
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Rob Bell as Don Draper

Rob Bell and I have become friends. After reading Kathryn Lofton’s recent book, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*,¹ I have realized some might accuse me of being a “synchophant” to my subject (16). So be it. My book, *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity*,² explored this figure, and I went into the project with an open mind, interested both in interrogating the subject (Rob Bell) and also in whether the church he created (Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan) had resisted what I’ve come to see as the colonization of megachurches by the capitalist way of desire.³

My take is that when Bell became most interesting is precisely when he changed paths—a change that is evident throughout his book, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*.⁴ His next book, *Love Wins*,⁵ became a 2011 best seller and launched Rob Bell into the stratosphere of American celebrity. This shift also moved him in an Oprah-fied manner towards a paradigm that tickled his readers’ desires and exploited the universalism that one finds in much of the recent speculation on Christian salvation—especially, but not

¹ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

² James Wellman, *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012).

³ See Daniel M. Bell Jr.’s *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2012), as well as William T. Cavanaugh’s *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁴ Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

⁵ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven and Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

exclusively, in liberal circles.⁶ Lofton’s definition Oprahfication could not be more apropos:

Oprahfication describes a type of commodification in which the personal is commercialized through confessions, conversions, and popular showcases of pluralism. Any subject, once Oprahfied, does not talk about structures and systems. Instead he or she tells stories and solicits yours and, from those particulars, distills generic slogans of change, of spirit, of the now (216).

The Oprahfication of Rob Bell is an apt metaphor. Since we became friends, I occasionally receive texts from him, and last summer, while he was filming an interview with Oprah in Maui, Bell texted me a picture of Oprah Winfrey and himself—a selfie. *Love Wins* made Bell marketable to Hollywood, and he took advantage of it. Moving West to LA, working with Carlton Cuse, the producer of *Lost*, he hobnobbed his way into a relationship with Oprah Winfrey. He was featured on what she calls [SuperSoulSunday](#), and now is one of her celebrity sidekicks in [The Life You Want Weekend](#). He is one of Oprah’s “handpicked trailblazers,” and I will be there for his visit to Seattle. Bell invited me to meet Oprah, and I am honestly curious. Has Bell been completely Oprahfied, or just gently tossed in Oprahdom? We will see.

In this paper I will outline my take on Bell’s more radical approach to the church, which he laid out in *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*. It was in this text that I discovered a megachurch pastor with a style and ability to portray a different kind of church life, which resisted the celebrity life of most megachurches, where prosperity is the gospel, and money is the point. As I think the reader will see, Bell created a momentary sociological miracle at Mars Hill, but he could not—or perhaps did not want to—sustain it. And that is a part of the analysis as well.

⁶ See NT Wright’s *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). Bell, by the way, denied that this book influenced his thinking.

Things changed, and Bell wrote *Love Wins*. In this book, discipleship of justice and mercy took a back seat, and charity became cool; it became Oprahfied. Bell colored charity and charitable work in terms of gift-giving, and he highlighted the luxury of being able to afford such giving, recasting it as a kind of display. Moreover, Bell took the strenuous journey of discipleship and he baptized it, generalized it, and universalized it, believing and hoping that everyone could and should be saved—and not in some ‘world to come’ but in this world. Right here and now.

I remain fond of Rob Bell. He did something remarkable, and the seeds of his sociological miracle at Mars Hill Bible Church remain. For a moment I think he accomplished something few thought possible, which I will explain in this paper. So this is the story of his transformation from a hipster to a prophetic preacher and then back, to an Oprahfied salesman pitching what is one of the best lines of spiritual advertising that one can find: Love Wins. Check out the recent blog about Rob Bell as Don Draper, a Christian madman [advertising executive](#). It is genius, and that is the point. In an age of advertising, the word becomes one more item to be sold, or so they say.

The Story of a Sociological Miracle

In September 2006, Bell had recently returned from a speaking tour (*Everything is Spiritual*) that included 28 events over the course of 30 days. With his energy renewed, Bell blurted out that the tour bus that he and his family and friends had traveled on was to be “Justin Timberlake’s tour bus the following week.” He gave a little giggle, “Yep, Justin and me,” and he sang a short Timberlake-like riff, obviously enjoying this pop star comparison. He goes on to describe a family vacation, and announces that his latest book,

Jesus Wants to Save Christians, is nearly done. It would be his most controversial book yet—one that challenged the very of heart of evangelical piety and politics—taking direct aim at the self-absorbed practices of his fellow megachurch ministers. It would also be a book that led him and his family into decisions that shook their very sense of security and brought them face to face with the reality of Bell’s own nascent liberationist rhetoric.

Once again the several sides of Rob Bell tumbled and crashed into one another: the slick celebrity wanna-be and the emerging Hebrew prophet, calling his people to the “new exodus.” The prophetic side to him also emerged, questioning the pretensions and ambitions of megachurches and the easy collaboration of the conservative evangelical church and the state, including its support for the Iraq war. And with this new side of himself, Bell demanded from his church and his readers not only a form of spiritual transformation but social transformation, as well.

Bell didn’t spare anyone in his prophetic critique. On the back cover of *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, he described how a rich church in Grand Rapids had spent \$20 million on itself next to the staggering statistic that twenty percent of Grand Rapid’s citizens lived in poverty. This statistic suggested, as his book would detail, that Christian churches that build glorious buildings and ignore social justice miss the very heart of the gospel. Bell’s words and rhetoric in this period suggested a zero-sum game: money spent on one thing takes money from another. But Bell seemed unaware of the ramifications of his own heated rhetoric. I asked Bell about this back cover broadside at the end of his tenure at Mars Hill, and he answered with a kind of defensive nonchalance, “Those were like straight statements.”⁷ As if the statements didn’t imply judgment.

⁷ Interview with Rob Bell by author, November 17, 2011.

A part of Bell's attractiveness has been his youthful naiveté—a wit and comic touch that lightened the mood and spliced a sense of humor into the midst of a sober moment. But the other side of that seeming innocence is that the words that he spoke casually provoked effects that reverberated throughout his church and into the broader public.

This is the story of how Bell's soul changed and was reformed even as he attacked the very heart of a system that had given him everything. Bell was nurtured in a conservative American evangelical system of religious and political power that promoted his name and bought his products. This system would become a target of his prophetic critique—how he negotiated the bludgeoning of his religious family takes us deeper into his complex journey.

The Mark of the Beast

As my own research has shown, evangelicals focus on personal sins and either ignore or rationalize systemic or structural sin.⁸ What we see in Bell's ministry, and particularly in *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, is a full on confrontation with the systematic politicization of the American evangelical church: "A Christian should be very nervous when the flag and the Bible start holding hands. This is not a romance we want to encourage."⁹

But Bell goes further than the simple notion that politics and religion make deadly partners. He compares the American empire to the terrible empires of the past, one of

⁸ I examined this prioritization of the personal over the social was confirmed in my research on twenty-four evangelical churches in *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christians Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Bell and Gordon, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 18.

which enslaved the Hebrews (Egypt), and the other which killed Jesus (Rome): “America is an empire ... what’s true of empires then is true of empires now. What we see in the Bible is that empires naturally accumulate wealth and resources.”¹⁰ Bell then offers a litany of statements that compare the enormous wealth of America over and against the poverty of more than half the world’s population. Bell quotes George H.W. Bush on how “the American Lifestyle is not up for negotiation.” Here, Bell argues that the great temptation of empires is “entitlement,” the sense that its privileges are not only earned but deserved. As Bell slyly meditates, “Imagine hearing this as one of the three billion people on the planet who survive on two dollars a day.”¹¹

Bell’s central thesis is that while winners may write history, “God always hears the cry of the oppressed.”¹² He establishes this thesis based on the history of the Hebrew people. The Hebrew tribe is decisively defeated over and over again by one empire after another, and yet God remains loyal to losers—to the oppressed. The remarkable fact is that Israel’s story survives despite its tale of grief. God heard the cry of the oppressed.

This proposition, while powerful as far as it goes, remains debatable. Does God always hear the cry of the oppressed? Many of those in the Jewish tradition have debated this notion. After the Holocaust, many Jews denied God’s very existence because, in their eyes, God did not act. Their prayers went unanswered. For Christians, Jesus is often designated as *the* answer to the cry of oppressed—to the “sin-sick” in evangelical circles—but to what end? Does Jesus save the soul and leave one in poverty? Does conversion mean prosperity and the chance to be successful? Success, or its promise, dominates in many evangelical traditions—and in the megachurch movement, in

¹⁰ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 121.

¹¹ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 125.

¹² *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 53.

particular. And for countries with majority Christian populations, does God's presence and Jesus' love mean that the countries themselves are destined for economic, political and military success?

How this all is worked out is up for grabs. The contemporary Jewish and Christian communities' interpretations on God's presence, or lack thereof, multiply endlessly. The American Christian Right, however, takes a specific position that American hegemony in the world is God granted and God ordained. Faithfulness produces American prosperity; America's economic and military might signifies God's blessing and confirms America's duty to stop evil and deter evildoers. America should be the policeman for the world as well as its rescuer when necessary. Again, many disagree.¹³

Bell, in *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, doesn't equivocate. God hears the oppressed and answers. God expects the blessed not only to hear the oppressed but to be in solidarity with them. A nation's success is only as good as its ability to share and care for those who left out and left behind. The problem is that empires become entitled. And at the heart of entitlement is the notion that a country is special, exceptional. Bell argues that empires, by their very nature, generate forms of entitlement—the simple but misguided proposition that a nation's blessings are deserved and should be preserved. Bell calls into question the very nature of America's soul.

But Bell goes even further by contending that in the *Book of Revelation* the “mark of the Beast” is this very “way humans misuse power to accumulate and stockpile while

¹³ See my article with S.R. Thompson on the relation of American Christianity and U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century: “From the Social Gospel to Neoconservatism: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*. Volume 7, Article 6: pp. 1-41. <http://www.religjournal.com/>.

others suffer and starve.”¹⁴ In Bell’s interpretation, the accumulation of wealth and power creates a zero sum game, in which as one side rises the other falls. He questions the very possibility that a powerful nation can resist the temptation of entitlement—can resist becoming another Egypt, another Babylon, or even another Rome.

Bell explained that in his sermon on the Iraq War, he “laid out a case against the Iraq War.” He argued how the plan for war was flawed, motivated by the American need for energy resources and security. The sermon was not on the Mars Hill website. Bell explained, “Maybe they took it down. We lost a lot of people after that one; there were parents with kids in the Iraq War.”¹⁵ Bell seemed to hold nothing back, challenging the motivation of America’s place in the world and the unjust nature of preemptive war.

And even more to the point is that Bell asked difficult questions about how churches should live and act in the midst of empires. Do they continue to build extensions to their buildings? Do they hire endless staffs that serve the “needs” of their “consumers”? Do they emphasize theologies that are purely individualistic and worry first and foremost about personal salvation? Do ministries focus solely on personal sins, and obsess over whether young people are having or have had pre-marital sex? Do these churches become cheerleaders for these national empires? Do they baptize national greed and create theologies that ordain great militaries and support violence as forms of redemption?

For Bell, Jesus *literally* wants to save Christians from this type of constriction and collusion. These forms of privatized Christianity thrive on empires that insulate the church from the needs of the world. Their theologies allow the church to ignore the

¹⁴ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 133.

¹⁵ Interview with Rob Bell by author, March 1, 2012.

deprivation of much of the world because God cares first and foremost about their souls and their salvation and their nation. It creates a type of missionary who can ignore poverty because salvation is about the individual soul and not about systems of deprivation and structures of social degradation. Such a stance insulates the church from caring about social systems because the real action is in the soul. Churches, in this context, become chaplains for the state, ordaining state violence as redemptive and even holy.

For Bell this very theological system is what he calls an “anti-kingdom”; it winks at human misery and ignores systems that cement social inequality and brutalize the enemies of the empire. Here, the radical nature of Bell’s frontal assault on the Christian Church could not be any clearer. For Bell, if Jesus gets angry, it’s not because teenagers have had premarital sex. It’s because a billion people in the world lack access to adequate water, but churches don’t lift a finger to help. For Bell, this is unacceptable. Any system that allows this kind of misery, whether Christian or otherwise, carries the mark of the Beast. Bell threw down the gauntlet, and the rest of the evangelical world scrambled to throw it right back.

“I hated that book.” So exclaimed one of Bell’s closest friends and a lay leader at Mars Hill. He shared the same sentiment with Bell. The lay leader explained, “That was part of the Don Golden era. God is green; Jesus wants to save Christians, the neo-cons and all that.” For Bell’s friend, the exercise amounted to a “waste of time,” proving to many that “Rob’s an ass.” The friend told me with a smile that he and Bell participated in

many “tough exchanges over politics,”¹⁶ but that each walked away with mutual admiration. Bell had not backed down.

Bell’s co-author on *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, Don Golden, had been called to be the “lead pastor” at Mars Hill from 2005 to 2008. Golden, with a background with World Relief—a global non-profit relief agency, sought to bring greater efficiency and responsiveness to the large global outreach at Mars Hill. The administrative side of Golden’s work received mixed reviews. Nonetheless, Bell embraced Golden’s partnership to offer a prophetic critique of the American evangelical church and the American empire.

As the scripture reminds us, prophets are not often welcome in their own house. Another of Bell’s lay leaders, who also rejected the book, described her deep appreciation for Bell’s work and his willingness to take risks, “to prod us to look critically at every theology, examining it in light of the example of Jesus.”¹⁷ Both of the lay leaders who challenged Bell and Golden’s analyses expressed enormous regard for Bell, even though they differed with Bell in their political affiliations. In fact, the second leader shared deep investment with Bell in helping young people and families in the inner cities of Grand Rapids, which included starting a large mentoring program for young children. Without any prompting, she explained her agreement with Bell’s rejection of building a Mars Hill cathedral. In fact, following Bell’s example, she invested her own substantial resources in street-level ministries. On the issue of the church building, she said:

The goal is not to build a big church ... there’s lots of big churches with beautiful buildings that you can go to, but I think the intentionality around Mars Hill’s building is that we have very adequate facilities for families to come and worship, but that’s not

¹⁶ Interview with Bell associate, by author, November 19, 2011

¹⁷ Interview with Bell associate, by author, November 18, 2011

where church actually happens, it doesn't happen during the week. We go out and we are the church in our jobs and our homes and our communities, and that's really more the emphasis.¹⁸

Bell's commitment to solidarity with the poor translated into what he didn't do—foregoing any interest in enlarging or remodeling the Mars Hill church building. He created a philosophy of ministry that argued that the real ministry of Mars Hill happened outside its walls, in places of great need. Bell did not stress over losing Mars Hill attendees, whether the thousand who left following his preaching in favor of women in ministry, or those who left after his case against the Iraq War. Surely, a part of this was Bell's preternatural confidence that new people would just keep coming, as well as fearlessness that consistently came across in our interviews—with Bell explaining, “What do I have to lose?”

At the same time, Bell stayed close to church leaders who ferociously disagreed with him. He had no problem with accepting people who did not share his commitments. In fact, he respected and honored them. When I challenged him to explain how he kept these simultaneous loyalties along side a powerful critique of wealth and privilege, he rebuffed my questioning—his allegiance to people transcended their political differences.

Bell combined a ruthless critique of political systems with a light touch. He consistently valued the integrity of individuals who took different perspectives—but he didn't waver in the friendship. He let people be. Whether this was a matter of convenience, equanimity, or perhaps his own doubts about his prophetic critique, it marked him as someone willing to take risks, and hold positions in some tension—a tension that took its toll.

¹⁸ Interview with Bell associate, by author, November 18, 2011

More Important Matters

This very independence spurred Bell's interest in liberation theology—a theology concerned at its heart with moving the church against systems of social and political oppression, and putting the church on the side of the oppressed. Bell wanted to push his own thinking and theology in new directions, to challenge himself and his congregation as well. To some extent, Bell's sense of humor and his ability to stay flexible smoothed and mitigated the hard edges of what he expressed in *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*. Nonetheless, he laid down an agenda for the congregation and continued to challenge the essential priorities of his own congregations' evangelical culture.

In the fall of 2007, Bell's sermon "Gnats and Camels" argued that obedience to religious laws often obscures the "more important" principles of faith. In his prototypical manner, he interrogated the Matthew 23:23 text:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.¹⁹

Jesus confronts the Pharisees, and Bell, using the scriptures themselves as interpretive keys, attempted to reveal what was behind Jesus' argument. In his sermon, Bell explained that in Deuteronomy 14:22, Israel was commanded to put aside a tenth of whatever their fields produced as an offering to God—and also as way to feed those who had nothing to eat. And so the Pharisees, in their intense desire to follow the law, carried this principle even into their use of spices. This obsession to be faithful, however, had blinded them to "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."

¹⁹ A scripture passages cited are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

Bell then explains each of these concepts, drawing on other passages of scripture where they are described, justice is that which is “fair, right, and equitable; including wages for the poor, care for orphans and widows, and justice for foreigners.” Mercy and faithfulness are “active pity, how can I act to help on another’s behalf?” but “Take care not to do your acts of righteousness in such a way that when you give to the needy, you’re announcing it with trumpets.”²⁰

Bell explains how the Pharisees considered Roman oppression a function of Jewish disobedience to the law. As a people they had become unclean and had sinned against God and received punishment at the hands of the Romans. If they were to overcome this condition, strict obedience to the law was necessary. Gnats, literally, were unclean, and wine had to be strained to keep the gnats out—a custom that Jesus ignored when sitting with the Pharisees at their meals. And Jesus, in reaction to Pharisaic condemnation, sneers, “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

Bell points out that to unknowing ears this is a great offence. The camel chewed the cud and lacked a divided hoof, and as such, was ceremonially unclean. Jesus’ words stung the Pharisee: “The Pharisees, in their attempt to win God’s favor, had missed the more important central agenda of God’s justice, mercy and faithfulness ... You have neglected the suffering of the world. God’s heart beats for the suffering of the world.”

Bell goes on to pick at the conventional evangelical standby:

Some people say, it’s all about me and God; when it all comes down to it, it’s just about me and God. It sounds great, but it’s not what Jesus teaches. Personal holiness is important...it’s not that you should neglect this, but it makes some people miss the central things, justice, compassion and mercy.... God isn’t just interested in saving you, and

²⁰ Rob Bell, “Gnats and Camels,” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. September 30, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

God is not just interested in you and your purity, God wants to use us to do something about the greatest suffering in the world.

True to his word, as I listened to dozens of Bell's sermons, personal holiness in thought, word and deed came up consistently. He did not neglect this aspect of the faith. For him, there was no either/or. A person's faith necessitates serious moral examination. Personal and political allegiances and actions must be continually weighed and considered

For Bell the biblical moral universe is prophetic at its core: "What is unique to the biblical narrative is self-critique...." It constantly questions its own assumptions, its willing to argue with God; it challenges the righteousness of Israel; it claims that God is present everywhere and not only in the Temple; it upends its own expectations for the Messiah, and it opens the flow of grace to the Gentile. It proclaims as St. Paul does in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

For Bell, the interrogative mode is the biblical interpretive key, "And that as a Christian, a person of faith then, critique of yourself, church, community, nation is central to a vibrant life in the world. And a discussion about spending 10 billion dollars a month on a war should be as basic as breathing. This should not even be remotely controversial."²¹

The prophetic imagination spares no area of the moral and spiritual life, either personal or the political. And Bell puts his own positions under the same moral microscope. So while Bell held his moral and religious positions with a sense of confidence, he drew out the radical implications of this vision not only for Mars Hill but for himself, as well.

²¹ Interview with Rob Bell by author, March 1, 2012.

God Needs a Body

“Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”²² So God tells Cain after his murder of Abel. For Bell, the moral core of scripture is the unrelenting question to humanity: Do you hear the voice of the dead? The murdered and the oppressed will not be silenced. Scapegoating will not be tolerated. The losers will be heard and remembered. The dead will rise again. God pledges that he hears these cries, but Bell insists that in order for the cries to be answered, “God needs a body.”²³

He argues that from the covenant given on Mt. Sinai, God called his people to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The priests mediate the relationship between God and humankind, but in words that Bell uses frequently in describing scriptural stories, these priests are “an invitation to show the world who this God is and what this God is like.”²⁴ They become his body. And what is God like? He is a God who speaks truth to power, a God who cares for the “orphan and the widow,” a God that led the weak from Egypt, and a God who confronts God’s people when, in their strength, they forget the weak, the stranger, the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. This is what God is like.

Bell illustrates that God knows that the people of God fall and fail: “And now Solomon is building a temple to the God who sets slaves free...using slaves?”²⁵ The prophetic imagination relentlessly confronts the weak who become strong and then take advantage and feel entitled: “Jerusalem is the new Egypt. Solomon is the new Pharaoh.”²⁶ The Bible, as Bell points out, shows how the prophets must repeatedly remind the people

²² *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 19

²³ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 31

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 39

²⁶ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 43.

of where they came from and that God is the God of the weak and the oppressed and this God hears the “blood cry out...from the ground.” Bell argues that this cry haunts the scriptures, but also knows that it is a cry that is too often ignored. God needs a body.

In Bell’s June 2007 sermon, “Do you realize how far we are taking this?,” Bell lays out his agenda for Mars Hill: “I want to talk to you about what it means to be fully human. I want to talk to you about implications of what we’re doing here.”²⁷ Bell then uses the Mark 2 passage in which the Pharisees confront Jesus and his disciples for “picking some heads of grains” on the Sabbath. He highlights Jesus’ wicked wit, drawing attention to Jesus’ question, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?” The story that he refers to is well known in the Hebrew scripture, and the Pharisees knew, of course, that David ate the consecrated bread and gave it to his companions.

Bell, aware of the sting in Jesus’ words, sides with him and the disciples, playing with the ways that Jesus compares his disciples to David’s companions. Bell makes the assumption that they were the Mighty Warriors described in 1 Chronicle 11—a text that gives a short history of David’s valiant and heroic companion warriors. Bell then shifts to John, chapter 14, where Jesus promises that “whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.” Bell rouses his congregation, telling them Jesus’ followers are like these mighty companions, “Be careful if you follow Jesus, Jesus has a high view of humanity; people are capable of greatness.”

²⁷ Bell, Rob. “Do you realize how far we are taking this?” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. June 3, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

For Bell, however, this greatness is neither about a Christian nationalism nor an upbeat prosperity gospel. Jesus' followers redeem the world through works of peace and justice. At the beginning of 2007, in a set of sermons two weeks apart, Bell had two members of Mars Hill tell their stories. One is the story of Rachel, a young woman recently graduated from Calvin College. Trained to be a teacher, instead of taking the suburban school track Rachel applies for job in an alternative high school in the inner city of Grand Rapids.

Rachel tells a story of endemic violence, broken families and the murder of one of her students. Gangs, drugs, and family violence shape the very fabric of these kids' lives. But Rachel maintains a compassionate detachment; she explains:

Some people ask me if I feel any fear or danger in that school, and it's true I feel that way at times, but more dangerous if I had built walls around me so I couldn't hear the cries of the oppressed: living a life of complacency. To be living with them is not only for them but for us. God writes the story of the Bible because we are supposed to be in that story. Some people believe but don't join in the story.²⁸

Bell's listeners internalized his prophetic vision in ways that one can imagine shocked many, like the parents of this Calvin College graduate. Rachel, in her sermon, pricks the conscience of the Mars Hill congregation, declaring, "Yes, we need money...not to quell our conscience with a check, but we need to be with the poor to recognize their faces, to see them not as an 'other,' but to feel what they feel."

And this voice of solidarity with the poor, God's body in action for the oppressed, took root in the hearts and minds of some of the 40,000 or so weekly podcast listeners across the globe. Six months after Rachel's sermon, Bell narrated how Rachel had moved on from her Grand Rapids alternative high school to start teaching at an even more

²⁸ Bell, Rob. "The School by the Side of the Road." Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. June 3, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

dangerous school in Denver, a school for street kids. Bell quipped, tongue in cheek, “Yes, Jesus is all about the path of ascent.” He explained how Rachel met a fellow teacher who had been a Marine, who had gone to seminary, and then signed up for the same Denver school. Rachel asked him what he was doing there, and he explained, “Well, I listen to a weekly podcast from a church in Grand Rapids. Earlier this year, Rob interviewed this young woman, and heard her story, and I knew I had to give my life to the kids everybody else has forgotten.” Rachel looked at him, “I am that woman.”²⁹

Two weeks after telling this first story about Rachel, Bell interviewed another Mars Hill attendee named Marilyn. She tells the story of how she and her husband, a minister himself, had moved with their three young children into a Grand Rapids inner city “former crack house.” Marilyn, with joy and wit, describes how their mission was simply to be a “presence for Jesus Christ” in the neighborhood. Mars Hill remodeled the home and provided the startup costs. Marilyn and her husband did odd jobs and began to “minister” by taking walks on their block. Children from the neighborhood started following them and became friends with Marilyn’s young kids. They visited her home. They initiated a tutoring program and clothing drive for the children in the area, and slowly but surely the neighborhood began to change.

A policeman, who had searched for drugs in the house that Marilyn and her family had moved into, also became involved in the ministry. After some time, the policeman and his family (somewhat reluctantly) moved into the neighborhood. The tutoring programs expanded and childcare programs grew dramatically as more and more Mars Hill attenders got involved and gave money.

²⁹ Bell, Rob. “Gnats and Camels.” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. September 30, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

The joy of what Marilyn and her family felt resonated in her voice and attitude. Bell, picking up on this, summarized the powerful motivation that was both a gift given but also a gift received from the people that Marilyn and her family ministered to: “So, your relationship with God is so powerful, that you can’t imagine doing any other thing, it just flows from who you are...you can’t imagine being any other way. ... So, fearless, courageous living is the most normal way imaginable.”³⁰

Marilyn embodied these words. The ministry blessed her and her family, and had become for her the greatest joy that she could imagine. For Bell, God needs a body, and the church should be this figure in the world, serving the oppressed, helping the orphan and engaging the widow. Bell probes, “What if the church converted to Jesus?” And by this he meant that what if instead of the church having a mission, what if the church *was* the mission—it’s very organizational heart served the poor, helped the needy, and listened to the cry of the oppressed? “If you had a couple thousands priests in one place, the earth would tremble.”³¹

Bell takes the notion of the priesthood of all believers and challenges the church to become a radical tribe of caregivers—God’s ministerial body in the world. This goes to the heart of his disdain for missionaries, who, for him, undercut the whole notion that everyone in the church is in mission, and so to call some missionaries sends all the wrong messages—that somehow business people, educators, or social workers are not missionaries. Everyone, if they are a Christian, is in full-time ministry. For Bell, the whole notion that churches should be sending money to separate organizations that feed

³⁰ Bell, Rob. “The Most Normal Thing Imaginable,” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. June 21, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

³¹ Bell, Rob. “Do you realize how far we are taking this?,” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. June 3, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

the poor or help the needy makes little sense. Why isn't the church doing this service? Or as he would say, "Why do the agencies get to have all the fun?"

Did Bell go too far?

How far would Bell and Mars Hill go in pursuing this radical critique of nation, church and the people in it? How far would Bell go in undercutting his own self-constructed image as a "hipster" preacher who bedazzled and enthralled people with his innovations, wit, and comedic touch? How far would the community of Mars Hill go in cutting against the evangelical penchant for concentrating on personal transformation as opposed to social transformation?

As it turns out, Bell and his family took it very far. Certainly relative to what might be expected from a megachurch pastor. In 2007, the Bells moved into a "crack house" of their own—a remodeled condo in the inner city Grand Rapids. They sold many of their possessions and lived for two years in the unit. One of Bell's closest associates at Mars Hill, who disagreed with the idea, helped him move into the neighborhood. The day they moved in, Bell's friend narrated how there were catcalls from the streets, "What do you want, you white blah, blah, blah." Bell's friend, the same one who hated *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, unloaded on Bell, "What are you doing here? You don't fit in here; you think you do." He said with a sarcastic smile, "You're going to cool your way into this neighborhood?"³²

I hadn't come across the fact that the Bell's had made this move into inner city—it wasn't in his sermons or his writings. I only heard about it inadvertently as I interviewed his friends and associates. Bell told me later that he had only spoken about it

³² Interview with Bell associate, by author, November 19, 2011

once in public, in direct response to a question from an audience member, “The preacher who’s always telling you all the great things he’s doing, that’s not the right way to do it in my opinion. Quietly, you go about working out your own salvation and it involves all sorts of interesting things.”

Bell’s tumble of motivations revealed that this “work” of salvation was hardly clear to him. He made the move in part to avoid the embarrassment that “...if they come and do an exposé on me they’re not going to find a mansion.” And in part it involved Bell’s relentless inquisitiveness: “I’m insatiably curious, so I wanted to live in a area that was not safe and I want to know, wanted to understand it in a visceral way.” The Bells lived with one car. Bell explained, “I walked everywhere, and on one Sunday, took a taxi to Mars Hill to preach.”³³

In the end, it didn’t work for him or his family. Living one doorway from the street drained his time and energies. The short distance between the dangerous streets, in which Bell reported numerous shootings, took its toll. And perhaps, most importantly, when I asked him how it impacted his own faith he explained:

It had the opposite effect...The gospel of denial can begin to affect you in profound ways, like when you are endlessly cutting yourself off...it becomes harder to announce a grace, which is generous and bountiful. ... God’s love is a lavish, over the top gift. And you actually have this conflict with Jesus and his disciples, because that money could be used for the poor, or it could be a demonstration of a God who lavishes us with love. And I think I’ve been at different places at different times in my life. Possessions can be a vehicle for your experiences of the divine; they can also be a barrier.

This insatiable desire to investigate the full experience of living in Christ pushed Bell in unexpected ways. Some might wonder whether Bell put his own family in danger as he

³³ Interview with Rob Bell by author, March 1, 2012.

tried to live out this radical call to solidarity with the oppressed. This, of course, is a query that comes from those who insist that safety is the ultimate standard for the Christian family life. But is that true about the Christian life? Did Christ call his disciples to be safe? The answer, of course, is no. The radical nature of discipleship by biblical standards is something quite different altogether: “Take up your cross and follow me.”

Bell tried to live what he preached. It didn’t work, or at least it didn’t work in the ways he thought it should. He kickstarted this radical gospel at Mars Hill. Don Golden partnered with Bell in these efforts. But Golden himself had his own doubts, which Bell narrated in a sermon in the middle of 2007. He summarized a conversation that Golden had participated in with a global expert on poverty: “Don asked this guy, ‘Can the church be converted to the great causes of the day?’ The guy said, ‘The big suburban churches, no, it can’t be done. If you really want see the kingdom expand you go over to this agency [independent non-profit relief organizations] to make an impact. The church, no, those people only think about themselves. They might write a check sometimes.’”³⁴

Bell gave this illustration and then reminded Mars Hill of the vision Golden had laid out for Mars Hill: “Let’s be crystal clear on Don’s vision for us—a profound vision that Don has given our church—the biblical example is urban renewal, poverty alleviation, the Church is the mission.” What’s fascinating here is that Bell proclaims that this is “Don’s vision for the Mars Hill church.” Was it Bell’s vision? And perhaps more to the point, was it Mars Hill’s vision? Whatever doubts Bell had about this vision, he

³⁴ Bell, Rob. “Do you realize how far we are taking this?” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. June 3, 2007. Sermon. MP3.

gave it a great effort. He lived with his family in an inner city condo for two years; he pared back his own personal possessions, and Mars Hill stepped up.

In 2001, Mars Hill, in contrast to many evangelical churches, partnered with World Relief to give one million dollars over seven years to rescue Africans from AIDS. Under Don Golden's leadership, in 2007, they were awarded a grant of nearly ten million dollars from the George W. Bush Administration to further AIDS education to several nations in Africa. Mars Hill also made a large push for the water filter mechanism that Mars Hill congregational members had created for communities in various parts of Africa. More generally, the congregation gave approximately 25 percent of its annual six million budget in mission—an impressive record relative to almost any church in the nation.

But the uphill task of personal and social transformation for his life, family and church created a cul-de-sac from which Bell had to escape. In the spring of 2008, Bell told church leadership he had to take time off, and he went to Ireland that summer.

This was the beginning of the end of Bell's ministry at Mars Hill. How far could a pastor take a church? How far could one push a church to reflect a radical and prophetic ministry of solidarity with the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized? Bell took it very far, but he ran up against his own personal limitations, and the limits of a local church. So, where was he on this fine line between foolishness and fearlessness? Perhaps it was foolish to expect a church, a congregation of very diverse people, coming from a region of the country that was relatively conservative, to buy into a radical gospel that challenged some of the core principles of the conservative American middle class. After all, Bell questioned whether preemptive war against Iraq was moral and ethical. He

probed whether America's sense of privilege and entitlement was either deserved or noble. He interrogated American's tendency toward wealth and entitlement. He asked whether living in safety rather than living in solidarity with the oppressed was even moral. He challenged whether a congregation should even have missionaries per se. He contested the whole notion that a church should partner with non-profits, relief agencies. All of these radical questions threatened taken-for-granted conventions of not only evangelical life but, even more powerfully, middle-class American life.

Did Bell go too far? Does the gospel go too far? Bell took a stance, and even at his most radical, he left open room for disagreement and for taking other avenues into the kingdom of God. And his own passion and desire to change the church drove him finally toward a sense of his own powerlessness, a sense that he couldn't control this or any church. No church or community was going to really change the inner city, and no minister could reinvent the church.

Did Bell Go Far Enough?

In the fall and winter of 2009 and 2010, Bell gave a set of teachings on the Beatitudes on the Sermon on the Mount. Earlier in this book, I used one of these sermons to talk about the how Bell argued that even in the depths of our sorrow and poverty of spirit, God blesses each person. We do not have to go somewhere else for the blessing. In a sermon in January of 2010, Bell taught on Jesus' command, "Do not judge." And he declared, similarly, that judgment of ourselves is most often a "failure to entrust ourselves to God." Bell also said that "a person who has deep roots, who can bend, but will not break; very few people take this path. Even Christian people, Christian pastors,

walk around with great anxiety, fearful and full of tension.”³⁵ Was Bell talking about himself? Can one be in God’s presence with patience, love and understanding without having to be something or do something?

Bell went on to declare, “When we judge and criticize others, we fail to entrust others to God. . . . If you don’t entrust others to God, you will be plagued by judgment of others; judgment rooted in our desire to control.” My own sense of these comments is that Bell was talking about himself and his relationship to Mars Hill. He couldn’t control them and in the end had to let them be who they were, just as he had to be himself.

None of this is to say that Bell thought his estimation of the American empire, or his critique of American entitlement, were wrong. Neither did he reject his passionate belief in the priesthood of all believers. In fact, he would later plead, “Ordain everyone, call everyone a minister; invite the whole church to be on staff.”³⁶ Bell continued to believe that this kind of radical service and care of creation is the way of the gospel. His passion in seeking to spread this message remained intact. Bell took his radical perspective and asked powerful questions about the country, the church, and the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I prodded him on several occasions to ask why he pushed things to the limit. At one point he reflected with a sense of pathos:

You become broken enough, fear is no longer interesting, or compelling, you then become like electric...because you don’t fear anymore...really, you’re going to criticize me...but do you really think this is going to slow me down? Like, it’s already happened, already

³⁵ Bell, Rob. “Sermon on the Mount Part 18: Judging.” Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI. January 10, 2010. Sermon. MP3.

³⁶ Skye Jethani, “Hello, Rob Bell – The Interview.” Huffington Post, Religion: The Blog. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/skye-jethani/hello-rob-bell_b_1307329.html. Accessed, March 4, 2012.

had my best friend betray me. It's all happened; it's all already happened and we're still here.³⁷

In 2009, the pendulum of the radical and prophetic activist seemed to swing back in the other direction, from social revolutionary to the safer and less disruptive rostrum of personal transformation. Bell's ministry, while energized following his sojourn to Ireland, also seemed to move away from his prophetic critique of the Don Golden years. If there was passion it was about the personal journey of creativity and self-discovery.

This manifested itself both in the book *Love Wins*, but also in his preaching, which dealt with issues of self-transcendence and self-discovery in God. In an interview in 2012, following his stepping down from Mars Hill, Bell pitched a vision that mined this area of personal transformation and the kingdom of God:

We have to embrace our desires. For many, desire is a bad word, something we're supposed to 'give up for God.' That kind of thinking can be really destructive because it teaches people to deny their hearts, their true selves. What Jesus does is something far more radical. He insists that we can be transformed in such a way that our desires and God's desires for us become the same thing. Incredible. What do you love to do that brings more and more heaven into God's good world? What is it that makes your soul soar? What is it that you do, that your friends and community affirm, that taps you in to who you are made to be?³⁸

In this post-Mars Hill interview, Bell is no longer speaking about the church as mission, but is focusing on individuals who create from a soul-centered passion for the true self.

This is a far throw from the radical theology of liberation and solidarity. In *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, towards the end of the book, Bell makes two statements, the first, in tune with his call for social transformation: "Jesus wants to save us from preaching a gospel that is only about individuals and not about the systems that enslave

³⁷ Interview with Rob Bell by author, March 1, 2012.

³⁸ Skye, "Hello, Rob Bell – The Interview"

them.” In the second statement, a sentence after this one, we get an inkling of the more recent Bell, the one who pens *Love Wins*: “Jesus wants to save us from shrinking the gospel down to a transaction about the removal of sin and not about every single particle of creation being reconciled to its maker.”³⁹

This later Bell resonates most powerfully in his last years at Mars Hill. And it’s the Bell who we discover in *Love Wins*. What’s perhaps most surprising is that much of what appears in *Love Wins* is material and subjects that were implicit in Bell’s earlier preaching at Mars Hill. In that sense, *Love Wins* was more predictable and certainly less provocative than what we come across in *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*. Nevertheless, the controversy of *Love Wins* made the book a bestseller and catapulted Bell to new heights; it also got him called a heretic. The *Love Wins* controversy, perhaps unexpectedly, at least for Bell, became his bon voyage out of the conservative Protestant evangelical world. The irony of it all is that it’s not the radical prophetic critique that ejected him from the evangelical camp, but questions about heaven and hell—which may say more about the evangelical world than it does about Bell.

Has Bell been Oprahfied, and if so, is that a bad thing?

It’s a great question and it remains to be seen. One of the things that struck me about Lofton’s book on Oprah Winfrey was the way she utterly ignored the impact that Oprah made on her audience. In fact, Lofton does this intentionally, explaining her choice by arguing that “whatever distinguishing marks we make between commodities and religion, they are, for all practical purposes, arbitrary” (212). Now, perhaps because I am a sociologist, I find this remark inscrutable. Lofton never explains the reason for her lack

³⁹ *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 179.

of any interest in the relation between Oprah and her audience. To whom is it arbitrary? To the consumers of these products? I doubt it. To her? I think so.

The task of the sociologist is not only to understand the commodity sold and delivered, but to explore and account for the relationship of the consumer to the object. What makes the megachurch work? One of the central tasks of my recent research is to discover this relationship. It is easy to identify and describe how megachurches work, but to really understand their effect on people is quite difficult to discover and more difficult to explain. Our research team did empirical work on this relationship, using qualitative and quantitative measures, and the results were far from arbitrary. Megachurch clientele know what they want and need, and they get it.⁴⁰ So how does Lofton know that this relationship is arbitrary? I don't think she does know.

I think as academics we are all too ready to dismiss or ignore the effect that religion has on its consumers. This is a mistake, and it seems to stem from a failure to overcome certain secular prejudices. I discovered enormous empirical data showing that evangelical churches do much social service and direct giving in their neighborhoods and to wider global causes than liberal congregations.⁴¹ So, in the case of Rob Bell, the connection between him and Mars Hill was not arbitrary.

His ministry turned Mars Hill Bible Church into a powerhouse of social service, compassion and justice to the city of Grand Rapids and to many around the country and world. I don't think this was arbitrary or meaningless. What I don't know about Oprah is whether her effect made any difference at all. I haven't done the work, but neither has

⁴⁰ See James K. Wellman Jr., Katie E. Corcoran and Kate Stockly-Meyerdirk. "'God is like a Drug': Explaining Interactive Rituals in American Megachurches." *Sociological Forum*. September, volume 29, number 3, 2014.

⁴¹ See James Wellman, *Evangelicals vs. Liberals: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Lofton. Lofton consistently sneers at Oprah for her easy charity that is always mixed with the charm of consumption, the very products that Oprah sells and profits from. So be it. But what we don't know, and Lofton has no data to adjudicate the question, is what Oprah's effects actually have been on her viewers. So, yes, we might say, for instance, that Bell is being Oprahfied, but to be clear, I really don't know yet what this really means or what effects it really has on those that participate. And so isn't it impossible to make an informed judgment? Or even impossible to know what the effects might be? And, if he were Oprahfied, would this be a bad thing? Oprah, a black woman from Mississippi, raped as a nine-year-old girl, who lost the child she bore at 14, who came from an impoverished cultural and economic background, rises to become one of the grand purveyors of American self-help. I want to know why this common sense Americanism—conveyed without spite or self-pity—is a terrible thing. Lofton passes off everything that Oprah does as a form of bourgeois exploitation. Is that true? Why is empowering struggling women from all sorts of ethnic and social backgrounds a bourgeois whimsy? So, the whole idea of Oprahfication, while clever, remains opaque to me.

In a similar sense, what Bell is doing with Oprah remains a mystery. Isn't it too easy to mock this partnership? And where does this desire to mock come from? Perhaps, what Oprah and Bell are up to is a form of Barnum and Bailey exploitation, but how do we even know? What is the counter-argument? Perhaps this form of empowerment changes lives, empowers some, even saves people from their own terrible choices. From a clever and cynical perspective, we might say this is simply Oprah and Bell burnishing their reputations in order to sell more books and brand them as embodiments of what it

means to succeed. Again, I want a real argument that tells me exactly why this is a problem. At this point, the evidence does not convince me. From what I've seen in Bell's work at Mars Hill, I have only have admiration for his leadership, for the way he transitioned from his church, and the way he conducts his personal and professional life in the post-Mars Hill period. As for Oprah, the jury is out; what really is her impact on American life? Why don't we actually do the very difficult empirical work to find out? Now that would be a study worth doing. Otherwise, we are left with one person's suppositions against another.