

# Rob Bell: Christians shouldn't fear controversy over doctrine

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**By Drew Nichter**

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP)—Precise definitions and formulations of doctrines aren't necessary prerequisites to evangelism or Christian unity, said author [Rob Bell](#), pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., who has become an increasingly controversial figure among evangelical Christians.

Bell rose to prominence rapidly after his Mars Hill congregation, founded in 1999, grew to more than 10,000 members in only a few years. He also has a popular video series and has written two best-selling books, *Velvet Elvis* and *Sex God*.

Rob Bell
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With that success has come plenty of controversy, which Bell maintained he does not pay attention to. "I don't Google my name," he said.

If he did, he would find a Rob Bell archive on a website called Apprising Ministries.

The site is the work of Ken Silva, who describes himself as “an ordained (Southern Baptist) minister who has dedicated himself to the study of comparative religions and non-Christian cults.” He touts the site as a “labor, specializing in apologetics and counter-cult evangelism, rooted in classic, historic, orthodox Christian theology.” The website includes more than 100 entries criticizing Bell’s teachings, lectures and ministry.

The criticism most often leveled at Bell is his affiliation with the emergent-church movement. He often is linked to Brian McLaren, a strong proponent of the movement. In 2005, McLaren was invited and then disinvited to speak at Kentucky Baptists’ evangelism conference because of some controversial passages in his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

When asked whether he is an emergent-church leader or claims any affiliation with the movement, Bell simply said, “No.” But he said he understands the movement to be “simply a conversation asking, ‘What does it mean to be the people of Jesus?’”

Addressing anyone who is critical of such a movement, Bell said: “I wonder whether that person is a Christian. That seems like a conversation they ought to have.”

Another charge leveled against Bell is that his teachings oversimplify the gospel for the postmodern generation. In his lectures, Bell asserts God is not angry and has made peace with all humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This principle prompted backlash and protests outside at least one tour stop.

Jeff Fuson, a longtime youth minister who recently became a church starter, attended Bell’s lecture in Louisville. Fuson agreed that while some of what Bell teaches can be seen as “divisive,” it can help believers think

about their faith.

“Even if we don’t agree with (Bell), he still challenges us to think and to pull some things apart and to wonder about our faith,” Fuson noted. “If a person can’t think about their faith, then their faith may be too brittle.”

Bell had much stronger words for those who are frightened by such an approach to theology, comparing them to Pharisees.

“They’re obsessed with absolutely minutiae issues surrounding, ‘What words do you use to define the Bible?’” he said. “They absolutely obsess about people who, in their minds, don’t use the exact proper definitive language they’ve agreed upon somewhere.”

Bell insisted he is not worried about offending fundamentalists, adding that each time he does so, “there are a thousand (new) people who are now listening.”

Fuson emphasized there currently is a “clash of worldviews,” adding that “It’s a very challenging debate right now and it’s way bigger than Rob Bell.”

He said that debate is between those who believe that in order to be a follower of Christ, one must adhere strictly to certain doctrines. On the other side are Bell and other “new thinkers” who are challenging such assumptions.

But Fuson added they’re all on the same team and could learn from one another.

“What the people talking about doctrine are trying to accomplish and what Rob Bell is trying to accomplish are actually the same thing,” Fuson suggested. Both, he said, want “to arrive at a place where you have people who are full-on followers of Christ. Both want the same thing, but they’re

attempting different methods. The reality is we probably need to learn from both sides.”

Responding to those he has offended, Bell said he has one question: “What are you scared of?”

“If you trust somebody who died and was resurrected, you’re trusting in somebody who doesn’t fear death,” he declared. “There are no questions that you need to be scared of. There are no new ideas that you need to be fearful of. ... There is no fear.”

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