

Afterlife debate raises many questions, limited answers

July 29, 2011

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (RNS) —For millennia, people have been trying to imagine what happens after death. Is there an afterlife—a heaven? Who gets in? And what happens to those who don't?

Books trying to provide answers to these age-old questions continue to be bestsellers, and some, like [Love Wins](#) by Michigan mega-church pastor [Rob Bell](#) have ignited intense debate, especially among evangelical Christians.

"A lot of people, the conception they were handed of the Christian faith is that you go around making judgments: So-and-so we know for sure is burning forever in the place," Bell told Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly. "You don't know that. That's speculation."



Rob Bell has sparked debate in some circles about how to talk about hell.

According to the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#), an overwhelming majority of Americans believe in life after death. Some 74 percent believe

in heaven, and almost 60 percent believe in hell. The majority of Americans also believe many religions can lead to eternal life. Evangelicals, though, are more likely to say theirs is the one true faith that leads to eternal life.

Mary Vanden Berg, an assistant professor of systematic theology at Calvin Seminary, puts it pointedly: "There is one sure way to know that you will spend eternal life with God, in the presence of God, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ."

Bell offers a more expansive view. He's pastor of the nondenominational [Mars Hill Bible Church](#) just outside Grand Rapids, which has 10,000 weekly attendees. He's also a popular speaker whose videos have a huge international following among younger evangelicals.

"For me, interacting with countless people over the years who literally are carrying around an image, 'God is not good, and God is not good because my grandmother dies, and at the funeral the pastor wanted us all to know for sure that my grandmother was burning in torment forever,'" he said.

Instead, Bell points to Scriptures where Jesus says he is restoring all things and drawing all people to himself.

"And Jesus tells stories in which the key character doesn't give up on, on whatever is lost," he said. "And I think we should take that seriously. I don't know what God has in mind, but I do know that this story that Jesus tells causes us to pause before we make any of those sorts of judgments. Be very careful, because God may be up to something way, way bigger than you've ever been able to comprehend."

Heaven, according to Bell, is not a faraway place but a renewal of the earth that begins here and now. He believes the spectrum of people who will be part of it is "wide and expansive." Hell, he says, is the consequence of choosing not to be part of God's massive embrace.

"God is throwing a party, and everybody's invited, but if you don't want to come, you are given that option."

But Vanden Berg insists the Bible is "pretty clear that when the end comes, that's the end. You don't have a second chance. Now might there be? Could God do that? I don't know of any theologian that would say God couldn't. God can do whatever God wants to do, but what does the Bible say? The biblical text doesn't indicate this at all."

Some evangelicals say Bell doesn't give enough importance to passages where biblical authors describe God's judgment toward sin.

"When they (biblical writers) talk about God's great love, it's always set against the backdrop of God's righteousness, God's wrath, God's holiness," said Justin Taylor of the Gospel Coalition, an evangelical network of traditionalist scholars and pastors.

Bell thinks many people hear about the judgment before the love. "But if you start with the love and the judgment flows out of that, God's love is for us to flourish in God's good world," he said. "For us to flourish in God's good world, judgments have to be made. Well, that then ... puts judgment in its proper place."

Many evangelicals have been severe in their condemnation of Bell. Some even have called him a heretic.

"We care about people and people who have grown up in the church, who have sung these same songs, who are being won over by somebody who has produced great videos and is a good communicator, but is ultimately teaching a false gospel," Taylor said.

Bell has "tremendous influence, especially with younger evangelicals," said Al Mohler, president of [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#), "and I think that's why we have to talk about this, because we're very concerned about

the loss of the gospel. Not just getting a doctrine wrong, but the loss of the gospel in this."

In June, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to reaffirm its belief in the reality of hell as an "eternal, conscious punishment" for those who don't accept Jesus.

Bell maintains he wants people to see that Jesus' ultimate message was about love, not just avoiding hell.

"Jesus didn't come along and say, 'You don't want to be a part of that thing, do you?' No. he came along and said: 'Trust me. Something big is going down. Here's a taste.'"