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“A Massive Shift Coming in What it Means to Be a Christian?” — TIME Magazine Considers Rob Bell

The real question is now whether the church has sufficient biblical conviction to resist this doctrinal seduction. Otherwise, it may well be that Rob Bell's “massive shift” is the shape of things to come.

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The edition of *TIME* magazine timed for Easter Week features a cover story on the controversy over Rob Bell and his new book, *Love Wins*. Interestingly, the essay is written by none other than Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and former editor of *Newsweek* — *TIME*'s historic competitor. Meacham, who studied theology as an undergraduate at the University of the South, helpfully places Rob Bell in the larger context of modern theology, even as he offers a basically sympathetic analysis.

Meacham explains:

The standard Christian view of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is summed up in the Gospel of John, which promises “eternal life” to “whosoever believeth in Him.” Traditionally, the key is the acknowledgment that Jesus is the Son of God, who, in the words of the ancient creed, “for us and for our salvation came down from heaven ... and was made man.” In the Evangelical ethos, one either accepts this and goes to heaven or refuses and goes to hell.



Bell, Meacham writes, “begs to differ” with this “standard Christian view.” He then relates that Rob Bell “suggests that the redemptive work of Jesus may be universal — meaning that, as his book’s subtitle puts it, ‘every person who ever lived’ could have a place in heaven, whatever that turns out to be. Such a simple premise, but with Easter at hand, this slim, lively book has ignited a new holy war in Christian circles and beyond.”

Well, “holy war” is an exaggeration loved by the media, but Bell has obviously ignited a raging controversy within evangelical circles.

Meacham then traced something of the reaction to Bell’s argument:

When word of Love Wins reached the Internet, one conservative Evangelical pastor, John Piper, tweeted, “Farewell Rob Bell,” unilaterally attempting to evict Bell from the Evangelical community. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says Bell's book is “theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way.” In North Carolina, a young pastor was fired by his church for endorsing the book.

All that is a matter of public record now, but what makes Meacham’s analysis really interesting is what comes next:

The traditionalist reaction is understandable, for Bell's arguments about heaven and hell raise doubts about the core of the Evangelical worldview, changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation. "When you adopt universalism and erase the distinction between the church and the world," says Mohler, "then you don't need the church, and you don't need Christ, and you don't need the cross. This is the tragedy of nonjudgmental mainline liberalism, and it's Rob Bell's tragedy in this book too."

This may mark the first time any major media outlet has underlined the substantial theological issues at stake. Meacham understands what Bell's proposal amounts to — "changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation."

To his credit, Meacham also understands that Bell's argument fits comfortably within the context of Protestant Liberalism. "Early in the 20th century, Harry Emerson Fosdick came to represent theological liberalism, arguing against the literal truth of the Bible and the existence of hell. It was time, progressives argued, for the faith to surrender its supernatural claims," he explains.

Rob Bell, he suggests, "is more at home with this expansive liberal tradition than he is with the old-time believers of *Inherit the Wind*."

Meacham is right about this, of course. Readers may differ with his analysis of other aspects of this controversy, and, in the end, Jon Meacham seems to admire Rob Bell, whom he describes as "an odd combination of Billy Graham and Conan O'Brien." But he understands that the liberal tradition in theology is where Rob Bell now finds his home.

Finally, this may be the most telling portion of the article:

Is Bell's Christianity — less judgmental, more fluid, open to questioning the most ancient of assumptions — on an inexorable rise? "I have long wondered if there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian," Bell says. "Something new is in the air."

Like Brian McLaren, who argues for "a new kind of Christianity," Rob Bell now openly wonders "if there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian."

"Something new is in the air," he says. Actually, arguments for universalism and the denial of hell are anything but new. The real question is now whether the church has sufficient biblical conviction to resist this doctrinal seduction. Otherwise, it may well be that Rob Bell's "massive shift" is the shape of things to come.

Jon Meacham, "[Is Hell Dead?](#)," *TIME*, Thursday, April 14, 2011. *TIME*'s cover reads: "What if There's No Hell?"

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "[We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the \(Re\)Emergence of Liberal Theology](#)," Wednesday, March 16, 2011.

