

Episode 117: A Look at Rob Bell in “The Heretic”

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Isaac:

With me today is professor and author, Owen Strachan. Owen's currently Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and he used to sit as President over the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Back in episode 89 actually, Owen graciously chatted with me about sexuality and culture, so if you've been listening, you'll remember that. It's great to have you back with us again, Owen.

Owen:

Thank you so much, Isaac. It's great to be back with you.

Isaac:

So today, we're briefly discussing this new documentary, which I've already explained a little bit, that's come out called *The Heretic*. It's all about the life and teaching ministry of Rob Bell for the last maybe 13, 14 years or so. Obviously, Rob Bell's teaching has made an impact on Christians for this last decade, and even more so. I think it's important that we address this new film about him. I'm looking forward to chatting with you, Owen, about it.

Firstly, let's just jump straight in here. What is one thing, or maybe two things, that really just stuck out to you from the documentary? Maybe it was something that was said, maybe it was something shown on the screen. Perhaps it was the way that the cinematography was done, the music. What are a couple things that really stood out to you, Owen?

Owen:

The first thing that stands out is that the film should be retitled. It should be called *The Fundamentalist: Rob Bell Walks Through Airports*. That is my new title and subtitle for this film. Let me explain just quickly, because you asked for a couple quick takes. I think I can give them to you.

In all seriousness, Bell has been branded now, and really has embraced even as this film shows, this label of heretic. In reality, though Bell frequently denounced this in the film and in his writings, Christians like me, and like you, and others who would hold that the Bible is God's truth, and Jesus is the only way to God, and things like this, though we're kind of the fundamentalists in his sights, I actually think Rob Bell embraces his own form of fundamentalism, and it's on display in this film.

Here's what I mean. Rob Bell believes that he has arrived at the proper interpretation of the Bible, and he has arrived at the correct theology of God, of salvation, of humanity, and he's offering us that in this film. Now, let me just note here at the outset, that's not how the film is presenting him. Again, it's presenting him as this genre-crossing, church-defying rebel, and there's really a heroic cast to that rebellion on Bell's part.

He's willing to speak the counter-cultural truths that no one else is willing to voice. He offers a mouthpiece for those who doubt, for example. What Rob Bell is doing, the film is arguing essentially, this documentary, is that he is a more authentic believer in God. Bell himself uses language along those lines.

He for example, denounces fundamentalists throughout the film. He also talks about the proper interpretation of Scripture. Honestly, Isaac, as a theologian, as a Professor of Theology at a seminary, I'm watching this film in preparation for our conversation, and I'm thinking, "This guy is a fundamentalist in his own right."

Isaac:

Yeah, Owen, that's an interesting point you make there, but when you talk about fundamentalists, there's a lot of people that don't quite understand what that word means. Could you just let us know what Rob means when he's talking about fundamentalists and what you mean when you talk about fundamentalists?

Owen:

Yeah, he and I are going to mean two different things. That's a good question. He's going to mean somebody who takes the Bible overly literally, and has a very constricting interpretation of God, and of salvation, and of the church, and who believes that Jesus is the only way to heaven. But not simply that, that basically such people, such fundamentalists, in Bell's handling, are more excited really about talking about how people are going to burn for eternity who don't worship Jesus than they are talking about the actual saving God of the Bible.

It should be said that I suppose there are some folks out there like that who have that kind of antagonistic religious style, and so that's an actual group of people, I suppose. There aren't many people I know like that. My understanding of a fundamentalist is not pejorative like Bell's is.

In terms of Evangelical circles, if you call yourself a fundamentalist and you're not self-hating, or something like this, you're meaning that you believe in separation as much as is possible from worldly influences, and so you're in a church that doesn't really engage the culture, that isn't really trying to get into dialogue with secular folks. You're trying to be a pure and pristine Christian outpost.

I'm not a fundamentalist myself, although the term has really shifted over the years, Isaac. J. Gresham Machen, for example, was called a fundamentalist in the early 20th century for believing in conservative biblical doctrine, for believing in miracles, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that the Bible's the actual word of God. What I'm trying to say is, fundamentalist is a term that people throw around a lot, and Bell himself uses it, and so I think it's ironic to apply it even to him.

Isaac:

Right, right, for sure. You know, from your perspective, what is it about Rob Bell and his teaching that attracts so many people? He kind of explains in the film that after he wrote *Love Wins*, less people were coming to see him, but now it's sort of rising up again. So yeah, what is it about Rob Bell and his teaching that attracts people?

Owen:

Well, Rob Bell is fundamentally a gifted communicator. He's a clever speaker. He uses humour effectively. He, at least in the past, you could tell when he was giving sermons, read widely, and read interesting sources that perhaps some professing Christians wouldn't have read. Rob Bell is the dude in your high school class who was a deep cat. He's kind of against the man, and sort of counter-cultural.

He attracts a following in your high school because that posture draws people, it always has. He's that kind of James Dean figure, if you will, in a Protestant way. He also draws because he twists the Bible, he relaxes the demands and duties of Christianity. He offers an alternative understanding of the faith that is very different from what I would say is biblical Christianity. A lot of people want a more palatable, culturally tame kind of Christianity.

That's another irony, Isaac, frankly, is that he's offering us this so-called rebellious, authentic Christianity, but it's actually pretty tame when you think about how our culture talks about inclusion, and how our culture talks about tolerance for all and these sorts of things. Bell is really adapting his message to the times, and he's drawing something of an audience. I didn't see the venues in which he was speaking to be teeming, just hordes of people, but people like that.

It's fascinating to me. There actually are a fair number of people who are pretty interested in what you could call lukewarm Protestantism, or sort of vaguely theistic theism. They want there to be a God figure, they want to embrace the mystery, and beauty, and rawness, and pain of this life, but they don't want to bow their knee to the biblical God of Scripture.

Isaac:

Interesting. Yeah, that's good. Now, what Rob Bell's kind of preaching... this isn't a new thing. Is Rob Bell amongst others like him that are sort of pulling people towards this lukewarm kind of Christianity?

Owen:

Yeah, he's one of a tribe, certainly, to use one of his favorite words in the film. Peter Rollins, for example, is interviewed in the film, as are several others, but Rollins is the same kind of figure who has made a career basically of pristinating doubt. So, in other words, you grow up in a conservative, Evangelical church, and you're going to be encouraged not to doubt God. Rollins and others are those who have tried to carve out a place for doubting in Evangelical faith.

Rollins says words to this effect in the film. "He put his finger on a doubt, and a questioning that was in that community," meaning the Evangelical community, "but wasn't able to be expressed." There are a number of figures like Bell, Rollins, Rachel Held Evans, who actually are somewhat tenaciously holding fast to a form of spirituality, even a form of theistic religion, but again, do not want to buy into the whole Evangelical theological program of the Bible.

Sometimes my tribe will make it sound like those types are going to become atheists overnight, and the fascinating thing is, they haven't. There really is this kind of middle lane for you to be vaguely theistic if you want to be.

Isaac:

Right. No, that's good. Now, Owen, upon watching the film, personally, I didn't really uncover a "Call to action." For example, if I was really intrigued, or I was convinced by what Rob was saying, I wouldn't really know what to do or where to go, other than maybe go buy his book or go surf, or something like that. I don't know if you experienced this as well, but what do you think the producers of this film were trying to accomplish? Was it just kind of saying, "Hey everyone, Rob Bell is still here!"? I don't know. Yeah, what do you think?

Owen:

Yeah, fascinating question. It certainly is kind of a puff piece for Rob Bell. It's not a classic documentary in the sense that other than some quick soundbites of mostly red faced shouting preachers, there's no alternative presented to Bell's views.

If you're doing a traditional documentary of the kind that is to be taken very seriously as an intellectual work, then usually you at least do something to showcase the other side's perspective. The strongest documentaries, just like the strongest public voices are

those who are able to surface the views that disagree with them, and then perhaps overcome them.

There's no such byplay in *The Heretic*, in this Rob Bell profile. It's basically just as I said earlier, Rob Bell walks through the back of bookstores in the Midwest. I mean, it's just kind of funny. It's also ironic, I keep raising these ironies, but they just kept ... it was like snakes in the grass as I'm watching this. They kept jumping up and biting me. Bell at the beginning talks about how megachurch, mainstream Evangelicalism has become, "Deeply entrenched," he says, "with capitalism."

I just had to laugh, because you're asking rightly about what the call to action is of this film, and it seemed to me that the call to action is basically just to keep supporting the Rob Bell industrial book writing complex. I mean, you got to buy this film for almost 10 bucks. I actually looked online at his upcoming tour. He's going to be in Chicago and prices start, I repeat, prices start at \$188.

So, I thought, "Man, this is a good gig where you can get pats on the back for critiquing capitalism, and you can make in one night more money than most of us make in six months. That's not a bad gig right there."

Isaac:

Yeah, wow, that's crazy. I did not know that. Thanks for sharing that. Owen, near the end of the film, you could hear a woman meet him at a book signing table, and she says something to the idea of, "I just wanted to thank you so much. I've learned so much. Growing up as a fundamentalist, your book is eye opening."

Something like that. She was probably in her 30s, and obviously we can't know specifics, we don't know who this woman is, we don't know what her upbringing was, anything like that, but why do you think she believes Rob's teaching is eye opening for her, compared to her upbringing?

Owen:

Well, if you grow up in an Evangelical church, to be very honest, in many of those kind of settings, you are going to be trained in a certain hermeneutic, a way to interpret the Scriptures. You are going to be taught a body of doctrine about Christ, about God the Father, about salvation, about heaven and hell, about eschatology, and you frankly aren't going to be invited to a kind of open source conversation where whatever you think matters as much as whatever the Bible says.

Let's be honest, Christianity is an exclusivistic faith. It is that. The Bible, it's an uncompromising book. Here's one point of contact between, for example, what I would teach and think, and what Rob Bell would teach and think, I actually do agree with him

that our lives are filled with beauty, and mystery, and wonder, and awe, and raw pain, and that furthermore, the Bible, just like our lives, is not a tame book. I mean, the Bible has some wild stuff in it that frankly, does not allow itself to be shrink wrapped in easy theological categories at times.

The distinction between someone like me and someone like Bell is going to be that I actually think all of the wonder, and mystery, and beauty, and pain is expressed by the Scripture. I mean, I'm reading Job, I'm reading the Psalmist, I'm reading imprecatory Psalms, I'm seeing Jesus face down the Pharisees, or alternatively, go silent as he's just about to be handed over to death. I'm reading about the return in the clouds of Christ.

Honestly, Isaac, this is not a prayer closet kind of book that I'm reading, this is a wild book that I'm reading. Now, I don't mean by that that you can't make sense of the Bible. I don't mean by that that there isn't clear definition to biblical theology, these sorts of things. I'm just trying to say, I do think there's an element here where the faith is a mysterious, wonderful, beautiful faith.

I'm very sad to go to your question directly. I'm very sad to hear people going up to Bell in the film and saying things like you quoted, because I am so sad to hear that because they don't need to go outside the bounds of orthodoxy to embrace wonder, mystery, and beauty. It's actually found in biblical Christianity.

Isaac:

Yeah, that's really good. Yeah, that's a really good point. Just to kind of even continue this idea, obviously Rob boasts of this more mysterious, authentic spirituality, but you're saying, "No, no, no, no, it's here. We open this book, this Bible, and it's full of this ... dark ... it's crazy the stories that you read in here."

When you look around, I mean, you're in an interesting place, kind of role, you get to look around, and travel, and see the general understanding of what pastors and different Christian authors are saying. Do you see a preaching of the mystery of God today? If this is what this woman wants, she wants to see that it's not just kakis and a tie, she wants to know that there actually is this depth, this authentic depth. Do you see in your line of sight this being talked about today?

Owen:

I don't think a ton of preachers have what you could call an aesthetic impulse, meaning I don't know that every preacher out there is always attuned to the full dimensions of the mystery, and wonder, and beauty, and rawness of biblical faith. I'm not meaning by that to drop a sledgehammer on pastors.

Your average pastor with the duties on his back, is doing very well to exegete a passage faithfully, and apply it to his people in a Christocentric way. If he's doing that, preaching the original meaning of the passage, and then preaching the Christocentric meaning of the passage realized through a biblical theological grid, then I'm very happy with what he's doing. If he's loving his people, if he's shepherding his sheep, if he's rejoicing with those who rejoice, and mourning with those who mourn, I think he's doing what God calls him to do.

I do think that we have to know that the artistic among us do have these desires to tap into the lived experience of the Bible, and sometimes we don't give full voice to the depth and richness of Scripture. I mean, I heard this read in my church recently, just in terms of the New Testament reading, the pastor read Luke 12:49. Jesus says this, "I came to bring fire on the Earth." Luke 12:49.

That's a great example, Isaac, and this is one of tons in the Bible where you realize that you can simultaneously understand the meaning of a passage. In fact, I think you should work really hard to do that, and the Bible is intelligible. It's God's revelation, it's not God's gobbledygook, it's God's revelation. But if you do that, you got to know that the very words of the Bible are going to blow your mind regularly.

Man, I got stuck in my devotions for like two or three days just on Luke 12:49 thinking about these words from Jesus. "I came to bring fire on the Earth," are you kidding me? It sounds like a Johnny Cash song. I mean, what is this? I've never heard anyone read that. You go to Lamentations, you go to Ecclesiastes, you go to the stories of the Bible, the lived experiences of someone like Ruth, and you recognize again, let me just underline this, you do not have to reject the authority and inerrancy of the Bible to reap incredible wonder from it.

I actually think you can argue that it's the person who loves the Scripture and sees it as the very word of God who is most positioned to see those things. We don't always make good on that, let me be clear, in our pulpits, or in our classrooms, you know I'm a professor, or in our devotional lives, but it's right. It's not because the word of God is tame, bound, boring, or low-definition. The word of God is a lion waiting to roar and pounce on us.

Isaac:

That's so good, thank you, Owen, for that. Two more quick things, and then we're going to wrap this up. Rob says something like, "Jesus came to bring universal solidarity to the Earth." How would you respond to this quote?

Owen:

“No.” That would be my response. Jesus did not come to bring universal solidarity. This isn't the Bible. Jesus came to cast fire on the Earth. Jesus came to separate the sheep from the goats. Jesus came to make a people for himself. I understand the objections people raise to an exclusivistic God. The Bible is a book of hard truths. It's not a soft, palatable book. Rob Bell says, by the way, he's the one challenging a soft, palatable faith. Rob Bell is the one serving up a soft, palatable faith.

His version of Christianity causes no friction basically, between predominant and postmodern worldview of our time. There's a few places, but it's basically a microwavable, religionized version of a postmodern worldview, whereas the actual warp and woof of Scripture takes us places we do not expect, frankly raises hard truths for us to get our arms around, including that Jesus did not come to bring everybody to heaven. Depending on how you handle the love of God, and what you mean by the love of God, Jesus is not, at the very least, Jesus is not going to bring everybody to heaven in the Bible.

Isaac:

And in the last part too, I mean, you'd probably agree with me that there wasn't, if any, talk about the cross or about the gospel the way that you and I would proclaim it, but at the very end of the film as he's getting on his surfboard, he says “This announcement, which is called the gospel, it's the announcement that you're loved exactly as you are.”

What are your thoughts on this? This is the only thing that Rob said really about the gospel and his words, “It's the announcement that you're loved exactly as you are.”

Owen:

The gospel message of the Bible, of the New Testament specifically, is the message of messages. It cannot be topped, it cannot be exceeded, it is the central truth of the Christian life. It is an absolute ideological miracle, this gospel message that Jesus died for our sins, and was raised for our vindication.

That is altogether different from the message that God loves you just the way you are. It is true that God has acted in love towards sinners by sending his Son to the grim, gruesome death on a cross. It is not true that God is fine with you staying the way you are in response to the cross. That's where you see ... you're totally right to point that out, that is Bell's soft universalism creeping out.

Christians announce a much better doctrine of love. Love in the biblical sense is not affirmative of your sin, your weakness, your lust, your raw pagan desires. Love in the biblical sense is transformative. It calls you to be conformed to the very image of Christ, to die to yourself, and by the power of Christ's blood and tomb to come to new life. That

is true love. True love is not “Stay the way you are,” true love is “Be changed into the image of Jesus himself.”

Isaac:

That's so good, thank you so much, Owen for your time and your wisdom today, I really did enjoy this. If you're interested in hearing more from Owen, he has a blog at Patheos called *Christian Mind*. I can obviously put the link on our episode page for that, but he also heads up the *Center for Public Theology*, and you can find more at cpt.mbts.edu. He actually has his own podcast there as well. So anyways, thank you again, Owen, I really did enjoy it.

Owen:

Isaac, I really appreciate it man, thanks.