

## BOOK REVIEW

### "Velvet Elvis" by Rob Bell

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Rob Bell is a prominent theologian associated with the Emergent Church movement. A recent survey identified him as the "10<sup>th</sup> Most Influential Christian in America" and the news media are saying that he may be the "next Billy Graham."

He is the founder and pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, a megachurch with 11,000 members. He has achieved national influence through his books "Velvet Elvis," "Sex God" and "Jesus Wants to Save Christians," and through his NOOMA video series.

In order to acquaint myself with the theological views of this prominent and influential preacher, I read his book "Velvet Elvis - Repainting the Christian Faith" which was published in 2005.

The book begins by pointing out that in every generation, it becomes necessary to "repaint" or reinterpret Christianity, as Martin Luther did in the time of the Reformation. He points out that Luther, while presenting a fresh perspective on the Christian faith, did not have all the final answers, nor do we today. So far, so good.

This book, like almost any other book, has some good insights and teaching. The part that resonated most with me was when Bell emphasized the necessity of interpreting Bible passages in their historical and cultural context, which is something that some fundamentalists today regrettably fail to do.

#### *Virgin Birth Not an Essential Doctrine?*

Bell appears to believe that as long as Christianity as a way of life works for us, then it does not matter how firm the doctrinal basis of the faith is. Here is what he says about the Virgin Birth of Christ, on pages 26-27:

"What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a

doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if as you study the origin of the word virgin, you discover that the word virgin in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word virgin could mean several things? And what if you discover that in the first century being "born of a virgin" also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?

"What if that spring was seriously questioned? Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart?"

"I affirm the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity and the inspiration of the Bible and much more. . . . But if the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn't that strong in the first place, was it?"

Bell certainly appears to be teaching that the Virgin Birth is not an essential doctrine of Christianity. One thing for sure, he has planted doubts about a basic doctrine that appears on almost everyone's short list of "Five Fundamentals of the Faith."

#### *The Bible Alone is Not Sufficient?*

One of the principles that Bell "repaints" is that of "Sola Scriptura" or the all-sufficiency of the teaching of the Bible. On page 67-68 he says, "This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that 'Scripture alone' is our guide. It sounds nice, but is not true. . . . When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true."

He questions whether we can ever actually know what the Bible

teaches: "When you hear people say they are just going to tell what the Bible means, it is not true. They are telling you what they think it means. They are giving their opinions about the Bible. . . . The Bible has to be interpreted. . . . The Bible is always coming through the interpretation of someone." (p. 54-55)

Starting on page 104 he tells of how he dealt with a crisis of faith he experienced while pastoring at Mars Hill, in which "I wasn't even sure I was a Christian anymore. . . . What do you do when . . . you don't even know if it is true anymore?"

I was interested to see how Bell handled that crisis and recovered his faith. It turns out that the way he handled it was by going to a therapist. He recommends that everyone handle similar crises in their own lives by going to a therapist.

This fits in quite well with his conviction that the Bible is not enough. Presumably we as Christians are fortunate to live in the age of psychotherapy, not in previous generations when Christians had no one to go to with their problems except God, the Bible, their pastors and caring brothers and sisters in the churches.

As he tells it, Bell was saved but not yet healed at the time of his breakdown. Presumably he was also saved at the time that he "was playing in a punk band a few years ago, and we were playing clubs and bars and festivals and parties." (p. 84)

### *Your New Mission, Should You Decide to Accept It*

Bell presents a whole new paradigm of missions. From now on, we are not to concern ourselves about getting anyone converted.

On pages 34-35 he pooh-poohs the idea of getting people "in:" "The focus often becomes getting people to believe the right things so they can be 'in.' . . . Once we believe the right things, then we're in. And once we're in, the goal often becomes learning how to get others in with us."

On page 88 we find that the task of missions is to let everyone know they are already "in:" "Have you ever heard missionaries say they were going to 'take Jesus' to a certain place? What they meant, I assume, was that they had Jesus and they were going to take him to a place like China or India or Chicago where people apparently didn't have him.

"I would ask them if people in China and India and Chicago are eating and laughing and enjoying things and generally being held together? Because if they are, then Jesus, in a way that is difficult to fully articulate, is already present there.

"So the issue isn't so much taking Jesus to people who don't have him, but going to a place and pointing out to the people there the creative, life-giving God who is already present in their midst."

On page 167 he advises against

trying to convert anyone: "The most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way of Jesus is most vividly put on display. To do this, the church must stop thinking about everybody primarily in categories of in or out, saved or not, believer or nonbeliever."

Bell's program of evangelism consists mainly of the church doing nice things for people, throwing a lot of cool parties, and leaving everything else in God's hands. While there is a certain amount of merit in this program, it appears to leave out the "foolishness of preaching" or any serious attempt to confront the unsaved with the consequences of their sin.

Bell's religion is a subjective thing - if it works for him and others, then its doctrinal and factual reality is not all that important: "I don't follow Jesus because I think Christianity is the best religion. I follow Jesus because he leads me into ultimate reality. . . . My understanding is that to be Christian is to do whatever it is that you do with great passion and devotion." (pages 83-84)

On page 147 Bell "repaints" Jesus' teaching on the afterlife: "For Jesus, heaven and hell were present realities. Ways of living we can enter into here and now. He talked very little of the life beyond this one because he understood that the life beyond this one is a continuation of the kinds of choices we make here and now. For Jesus, the question wasn't, how do I get into heaven? but how do I bring heaven here?"

On page 166 Bell urges us to paint a happier face on Christianity: "It is so toxic for the gospel when Christians picket and boycott and complain about how bad the world is. This behavior doesn't help. It makes it worse. It isn't the kind of voice Jesus wants his followers to have in the world. Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light isn't as bright as it could be?" There may be some truth to this, but didn't Jesus and the Old Testament prophets often



express a very negative attitude to the sinfulness of the world they lived in?

In his footnotes Bell heartily recommends books by some very unreliable and doctrinally unsound authors, such as Brian McLaren, Dallas Willard, Ken Wilber and Marcus Borg. (Yes, this is the same Marcus Borg who has been associated with the "Jesus Seminar," the folks who cast votes on whether or not the sayings of Jesus in the Bible are authentic - according to them, the Gospels are mostly not authentic. In other words, the Jesus Seminar completely rejects the authority of the Word of God).

### ***Not Recommended - This "Elvis" is "All Shook Up"***

While "Velvet Elvis" has some thoughtful and thought-provoking material that might be of help to the discerning reader, there is too much error mixed in here to be able to recommend this book for the general public or for Christians seeking edification and reliable teaching.

I would freely admit that there is much about the doctrine and practice of modern fundamentalism that needs to be repainted, reexamined and perhaps discarded. But "Velvet Elvis" does not lead us in the right direction. It leads us in the way of subjectivism and indifference to sound doctrine, and this is not the way we want to go.

If the theology of "Velvet Elvis" is the wave of the future, then the prospects for postmodern Christianity are dim and grim indeed.

### ***What Other Reviewers Have Said About "Velvet Elvis"***

"Rob Bell makes me mad because he preaches an anti-gospel. He craftily does this by portraying the essence of Christianity as following Jesus and treating people the way Jesus did. While this is important, living the 'Jesus life' is not the essence of Christianity and neither is obeying the commands of Jesus (as important as that is). The essence of Christianity centers upon the work of Christ on behalf of sinners (i.e. substitutionary atonement). . . . Over and over again he talks about living the way of

Jesus and being like Jesus, but without the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus' work! This is scandalous." - Pastor Pat Abendroth, Omaha Bible Church.

"Bell is a deconstructionist. The meaning of Scripture cannot be found in any objective manner since it must be interpreted by subjective people. . . . Like all emergent leaders Bell wants to focus on being right not thinking right (having correct theology). . . . The point is not our having the truth but our having joy. . . . The underlying philosophy held by Bell and other emergent leaders is pure poison. Beware!" - Pastor Gary Gilley, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, Illinois.

"Bell's neo-orthodox view of the Bible would be along the lines that the text of Scripture itself is not necessarily inspired but rather as the Holy Spirit inspires a particular passage to a particular person it then comes to life and it becomes the Word of God. We would then breathe it in, so to speak, living it out but in a highly subjective and existential personal experience. . . . Rob Bell has been seduced into its new repainted version of social gospel of liberal theology, which just as in liberation theology, ends up reducing Christ Jesus to a social reformer - little more than a cause to live for as one fights poverty, AIDS, social injustice, etc." - Pastor Ken Silva, Apprising Ministries

"Bell, as a postmodern believer, emphasizes mystery and doubt as the keys to genuine Christian experience. Objective truth and concrete propositions concerning the nature of God, the Bible, and even Jesus Christ are seen as secondary at best, and at worst 'bricks' which hinder a lively faith. . . . By failing to insist on a literal virgin birth as part of what-is-necessary-to-believe, Bell has taken the sadly well-traveled road of liberalism. . . . According to Bell, Jesus' death actually and really accomplished the forgiving of everyone's sins and the reconciliation of everybody to the Father. In other words, God's wrath has been propitiated for everyone. He now loves everybody in the same way and sees everyone as robed in the righteousness of Christ. All that is

left is for people to 'live in this new reality'. . . . Once again, Rob Bell seems to be teaching something directly contrary to the Word of God. This doctrine is not only erroneous, it has disastrous results. Bell's error here is precisely what has led to the abysmal decline of missions in the mainline churches. After all, if the nations are already reconciled to God because of Christ, why bother them with pesky, fundamentalist missionaries who demean them by telling them they still need to be saved from the wrath that is to come?" - Dale Van Dyke, Pastor, Harvest Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"[Bell] says that Christianity is an endless process of rethinking the Bible and likens his non-dogmatic theological position to jumping on a trampoline. He says that doctrine should be elastic and flex and stretch like a trampoline. . . . In typical emerging church fashion, Bell exalts doubt. . . . The Bible, though, exalts faith." - David Cloud, in O Timothy, February, 2009.

"In 'Velvet Elvis,' Rob Bell repeatedly calls into question a person's capability to accurately interpret Scriptures, saying God's Word is much too deep and mysterious for us to even comprehend, much less formulate dogmatic creeds around. . . . Bell's notion that we can't be sure about any of our doctrines is nonsense. While the Bible is vague on certain points (i.e. eschatology) it is crystal clear on others (i.e. substitutionary atonement). To not acknowledge that fact is to surrender the clarity of God's Word and makes God out to be one very poor communicator!" - Matthew Cochrane, "Not Conformed Thoughts."