



## ROB BELL'S ABSTRACT "ELVIS"

### A CRITIQUE OF *VELVET ELVIS*

BY BOB DEWAAY

Rob Bell is a very articulate spokesman for the postmodern theology that characterizes the Emergent Church. Having watched two of his videos, I can testify that his communication skills are superb. His book *Velvet Elvis* is creative and imaginative both in content and layout. But there are serious problems with his theology. I will begin with a description of the basic premise that lies beneath the title of Bell's book. Then I will discuss several of Bell's theological claims.

#### IN SEARCH OF THE REAL "ELVIS"

The literal "Velvet Elvis" is a particular portrayal of velvet-crafted Elvis Presley that Bell owns. The artwork serves Bell's book as an analogy to the Christian faith. Bell claims that all versions of Christianity are paintings or portrayals, just as his velvet Elvis is a portrayal of Elvis. Since that version of Elvis is not the only one ever created, it would be just as absurd to expect there to be only one "painting" of Christianity—it can be viewed and captured from many angles. Bell's book fashions one for his readers.

The problem with the analogy is that an actual Elvis lived and still can be seen in photos and on videos and thus can serve as an objective standard by which to judge artistic portrayals of Elvis. Someone could use abstract art that employed a collage of images that bear no resemblance to a human being and call it "Elvis" but everyone would know it was not Elvis.

In historical Christian theology, the

inerrant Bible interpreted according to a valid hermeneutic that sought to know the Biblical author's meaning was the standard "picture" of the real thing. That meaning gave "artists" (it's a bad analogy but I will interact with it because it is Bell's) the standard by which they made their "portrayal." Various systematic theologies with creeds and definitions can and should be judged as to how well they portray the truth of Scripture. The postmodern approach of Bell and others claims that objectivity is impossible, therefore to judge a theology to be "biblical" or not is impossible and futile.

Unfortunately Bell has created a piece of abstract art and called it "Christianity." He lets us know early on that his masterpiece is abstract by explaining his view of the object: "Jesus took part in this process [of constant change] by calling people to rethink faith and the Bible and hope and love and everything else, and by inviting them into the endless process of working out how to live as God created us to live." This idea of a Christian faith that is "morphing" (Bell's term on the same page just cited) is a recurrent theme in Emergent/postmodern theology. But Jesus in a process that is still happening rules out the "once for all" statements in the Bible.

The Bible says the faith was "once for all delivered" (Jude 3) where "the faith" means the content of God's verbal, inerrant revelation. The Bible describes Jesus in terms precisely opposite to what Bell uses: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets

in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1, 2). The God of the Scriptures spoke authoritatively and with finality.

Bell claims that people in church history (he gives Luther as an example<sup>2</sup>) were involved in "rethinking." I don't deny that. But when he says that we have no objective means to determine whether Luther's teachings or those of the Council of Trent are in closer agreement with the teachings revealed once for all in the Bible—there I strongly disagree. In fact Bell rejects "Scripture alone" on principle:

This [that the canon was not settled until the 4th century] 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 it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is.<sup>3</sup>

He thereby takes the same position that the Roman Catholic Church took against the Reformers: That since the Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) gave us the Bible, the Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) is authoritative over the Bible. Bell's version simply expands that idea beyond Rome to any Christian group anywhere struggling with the meaning of the Bible. Rather than to rely on a grammatical/historical approach to determine the author's

meaning, he trusts that in some manner the Holy Spirit is “enlightening us.”<sup>4</sup>

I believe that inspired, authoritative revelation was given once for all and is contained in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit gave us the Bible by inspiring the Biblical authors, not by inspiring 4th century clerics. They merely recognized the evidence that pointed to the true apostolic source of writings Christians had cited as authoritative since the death of the apostles.<sup>5</sup> Therefore revelation is not an ongoing process.

Bell, on the other hand, likens his view to the fluidity of jumping on a trampoline and calls the views of theologians like me, “brickianity.” This [brickianity] he claims is not good news but bad news about walls that keep people out.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, this brick wall metaphor is Bell’s way of repudiating systematic theology—a practice he shares with every Emergent/postmodern writer I have studied (which are many).

In place of the doctrines of systematic theology<sup>7</sup> that needed to be justified biblically, Bell’s “Elvis” is based on a mysterious original: “The Christian faith is mysterious to the core.”<sup>8</sup> His misuse of the term “mysterious” results in a semantic sleight of hand that confuses readers through a major category error. “Mystery” in the Bible means that which could not be known had God not chosen to reveal it. For example, Paul claims God revealed to him the “mystery” that God was saving Jews and Gentiles through the gospel and making them co-heirs in Christ. Once this is revealed, it is no longer mysterious or unknowable. But Bell means something entirely different. Bell writes “The mystery is the truth.”<sup>9</sup> This comes in a section where he poses what he considers unanswerable questions. Rather than using the term as Paul did to mean, “what would not be known had God not revealed it to His apostles and prophets” (**Ephesians 3:3-6**), Bell uses it to mean “that which cannot be fully known or answered, the ‘mysterious.’” That is equivocation, and it is not acceptable.

### THE LEAP OF FAITH

Rather than to search the Scriptures to

find a valid doctrine that God has revealed through the Biblical authors (systematically taking into account ALL God has spoken on a given topic), Bell jumps on a theological trampoline and invites others to join in the experience. His “jump” turns out to be the very “leap of faith” that was proposed by 20th century existential theologians who had, like Bell, given up on the belief that truth about God that comes from God can be validly known. Bell says, “It’s not so much that the Christian faith *has* a lot of paradoxes. It’s that it *is* a lot of paradoxes. And we cannot resolve a paradox.”<sup>10</sup> So the “jump in the air” turns out to be a leap into the dark—the unknown and unknowable. Paradoxes are like square circles: you can talk about them but such talk reveals precisely nothing.

Having established that we cannot validly know enough to build a wall or foundation with theological bricks, Bell invites us on a journey. But how do we know that a Christian journey is a better one than a Muslim one? For Bell, we don’t. We know that Christian ethics and social action are very good things, and if we engage in these practices our Muslim neighbors will be better off—even if they stay Muslim. Says Bell, “Another truth [remember this means “mystery” for Bell] about the church we’re embracing is that the gospel is good news, especially for those who don’t believe it.”<sup>11</sup> This is the very problem that all versions of neo-orthodoxy run into. If faith cannot be grounded in inerrant Scripture properly interpreted (and they assume it cannot), then we have no reason to assume a Christian “leap” is better than a Hindu “leap.”

Since Christianity is mystery and paradox (according to Bell’s thinking) we cannot build a foundation with any theological bricks because they are too inflexible. That is where he brings in his trampoline analogy:

A trampoline only works if you take your feet off the firm, stable ground and jump into the air and let the trampoline propel you upward. Talking about trampolines isn’t jumping; it’s talking.

Two vastly different things. [sic] And so we jump and we invite others to jump with us, to live the way of Jesus and see what happens. You don’t have to know anything about the springs to pursue living “the way.”<sup>12</sup>

How do we know that a Christian jump (in the absence of any *a priori* knowledge of truth) is better than jumping on a trampoline and living the way of Ghandi or the Dali Lama? The answer is we do not, other than possibly by pragmatic means which always fail as tests for truth.

Francis Schaeffer warned against what Bell and other postmodern writers are now doing back in 1968. What he says is directly applicable to Bell’s “jump”:

If we think that we are escaping some of the pressures of the modern debate by playing down propositional Scripture and simply putting the word ‘Jesus’ or ‘experience’ upstairs, [where nothing can be verified] we must face this question: What difference is there between doing this and doing what the secular world has done in its semantic mysticism, or what the New Theology [neo-orthodoxy] has done? . . . If what is placed upstairs is separated from rationality, if the Scriptures are not discussed as open to verification where they touch the cosmos and history, why should one then accept the evangelical upstairs any more than the upstairs of modern radical theology? . . . Why should it not just be an encounter under the name Vishnu?<sup>13</sup>

Schaeffer asks a good question: why not Vishnu? There is no answer once we reject the Reformation affirmations about the Scripture, such as its authority and clarity.

That is precisely where Schaeffer directed his readers from an earlier generation: “The Reformation and the Scriptures say that man cannot do any-

thing to save himself, but he can, with his reason, search the Scriptures which touch not only 'religious truth' but also history and the cosmos. He not only is able to search the Scriptures as the whole man, including his reason, but he has the responsibility to."<sup>14</sup> This, Schaeffer wrote to rebut religious existentialism with its religious leap with "no point of verification." Rob Bell is taking thousands of people who were not yet born when Schaeffer issued his warnings right back into the neo-orthodoxy that destroyed so many churches during the 20th century.

Bell never uses the term "neo-orthodoxy," but his position on Scripture echoes it. Like those who call the U.S. Constitution a "living document" to escape its meaning, neo-orthodox theology uses similar terminology to do the same with the Bible. So does Bell: "When you embrace the text as living and active, when you enter its story, when you keep turning the gem, you never come to the end."<sup>15</sup> You also never arrive at a binding meaning. Bell uses the typical postmodern argument that because documents (like the Bible) must be interpreted, that therefore they can have no fixed meaning (the author's). Says Bell, "The Bible has to be interpreted. Decisions have to be made about what it means now, today."<sup>16</sup>

If, however, meaning is determined by the author, the meaning will never change and is not different today. There may be new applications, but not new meaning. Claiming the sort of fluidity, mysterious nature, and ambiguity that Bell does creates the scenario where the readers of the Bible determine its meaning. This implication is not escaped by claiming, as Bell does, that the Holy Spirit is involved in the process. The Bible claims that the Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical authors. By so doing, the meaning was fixed, "once for all" and delivered to the saints. But Bell takes the neo-orthodox position: "The authority is God who is acting in and through those people [1st century Christians] at that time and now these people at this time."<sup>17</sup> This solves no problems and makes it impossible to

make exclusive truth claims. The Mormon Church could just as well say that God was working through Joseph Smith and now he is working through their apostles. (In fact they do claim that.) So is Bell willing to say that his Mars Hill Church is valid and the Mormon Church down the street is not? I cannot see what grounds he would have to do so.<sup>18</sup>

When the readers (however pious and well meaning they may be and however committed to some community) determine the meaning, there is no valid binding and loosing. They are only bound to the ideas of their own minds. That is not how Bell sees it: "This is why binding and loosing is so exhilarating. You can only do it if you believe and see God at work now, here in this place."<sup>19</sup> No! We are bound by the teachings of Christ and His authoritative apostles, not an existential experience we interpret as "God at work now." Without *a priori* clear, binding revelation from God about God we cannot know what is or what is not "God at work". Otherwise we might interpret anything that strikes our fancy as "God at work."

### THE ULTIMATE ROLE REVERSAL: MAN AS THE OBJECT OF GOD'S FAITH

The most egregious error in *Velvet Elvis* is found in the section where Bell offers many details about the nature of rabbinical instruction and discipleship in Jesus' day. Much of his information about Jewish practices is interesting and accurate. But his application of the material is shockingly unbiblical. His error is to assume that since Jesus was Jewish and was a rabbi, that therefore almost everything that was descriptive about Jewish rabbis of His day is true about Him. This is a *de facto* denial of the uniqueness of Christ.

For example, in a section where Bell describes Jewish education and educational techniques, Bell misquotes a Scripture: "Jesus later says to his disciples, 'Remember, everything I *learned* I passed on to you'" (emphasis his; he footnotes John 15:15).<sup>20</sup> He then asks, "Did Jesus go to school and learn like

the other Jewish kids his age?"<sup>21</sup> That is not the point of John 15:15! Here is what the passage says: "*No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you*" (John 15:15). The Greek said "heard" not "learned." Furthermore, his learning was from the Father with whom John claimed Jesus pre-existed (John 1:1). Jesus was no typical Rabbi.

Furthermore, Bell assumes that Jesus' relationship to His disciples must be also of the same sort that was typical between rabbis and disciples of that day. But that assumes too much and fails to account for what the Bible teaches. For example, in the narrative where Jesus tells them to "drop their nets," Bell assumes that therefore Jesus sees some sort of ability in them: "Of course you would drop your net. The rabbi believes you can do what he does. He thinks you can be like him."<sup>22</sup> That is a very man-centered interpretation that assumes that Jesus believes in innate human ability rather than His sovereign power to transform. Because ordinary rabbis took the best students based on certain criteria does not mean that Jesus did the same. For example, the commission to be made "fishers of men" in Luke 5 came after a miraculous catch of fish caused Peter to say, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." This is likely an allusion to Isaiah's call in Isaiah 6. Isaiah saw God's glory and was convicted of his sinfulness. Peter followed suit. This was no ordinary rabbi that Peter encountered.

One of the videos I saw of Bell preaching was about this topic of rabbis and disciples. After a very well articulated discussion of rabbinic practices, Bell came to the conclusion that the main point is that we must have faith in ourselves because Jesus believes in us. WHAT? Man is the object of God's faith? Bell makes the same point in his book, discussing the incident of Jesus walking on the water and Peter starting to do the same. Here is Bell's interpretation: "And Jesus says, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; Jesus is

doing fine. Peter loses faith in himself.”<sup>23</sup> That is very bad exegesis. Furthermore, Peter did have faith in himself later on and it was a bad thing: “Peter said to Him, ‘Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!’” (Matthew 26:35a). We all know what happened.

Throughout the gospels, “great faith” or “little faith” had to do with people’s belief about Christ. For example, the centurion who did not consider himself “worthy” for Christ to come to him had a very high estimation of Jesus’ authority (Luke 7:2 – 10). He had “great faith” according to Jesus. His faith was in Christ, not himself.

According to Bell, what frustrates Jesus is “When his disciples lose faith in themselves.”<sup>24</sup> Bell makes a serious error when he assumes that when an ordinary rabbi chooses disciples based in his perception of their own abilities and potential to be like the rabbi himself that, therefore, Jesus must have had faith in the abilities and capabilities of His disciples. But this is not the case. No one will ever be conformed to the image of Christ because of his own innate human abilities. Bell’s humanistic teachings disregard the Biblical doctrine of human sinfulness and inability.

Bell makes it clear that we are not misunderstanding his point:

God has an incredibly high view of people. God believes that people are capable of amazing things. I have been told that I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. [sic] But what I am learning is that Jesus believes in me. I have been told that I need to have faith in God. Which is a good thing. [sic] But what I am learning is that God has faith in me.<sup>25</sup>

Is man the object of God’s faith? Here is God’s testimony about man:

*What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who*

*understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.* (Romans 3:9 – 12)

In John 2:24, 25 it says this: “But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.” The word “entrusting” is *pisteuo* in the Greek, the word “to believe.” John 2:23 shows that this lack of faith that Jesus had in man is applied to believers. The reason for not trusting or believing in men was Jesus’ knowledge of the inner nature of man (*anthropos*, humanity). So most decidedly Jesus does not have faith in man.

We have to conclude that Bell is leading people away from the faith once for all delivered to the saints and toward a man-centered faith that believes in self as the appropriate object of faith and not to God Himself as the ONLY object of faith.

### BELL’S “HEAVEN” AND “HELL” COME TO EARTH

In *Velvet Elvis*, Bell asserts that all people are already forgiven, reconciled, without having to respond to the Gospel in the manner Jesus said in the Great Commission: “and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Here is Bell’s claim: “So this reality, this reconciliation, is true for everybody.”<sup>26</sup> His proof text is Colossians 1:20 which he assumes teaches universalism. But the passage includes humans, spirits and the material world. Wicked spirits will never be reconciled to God, and Christ has triumphed over them and disarmed them (Colossians 2:15). Elsewhere Paul “begs” people to be reconciled to God (2Corinthians 5:20). People who are not reconciled to God are ultimately consigned to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). But, having eschewed systematic theology, Bell’s trampoline jump does not require consideration of those pas-

sages that call into question his use of a favorite proof text.

Bell sees that forgiveness and reconciliation are already true for all people, and the problem is that some have not accepted that particular telling of their story. He says, “The fact that we are loved and accepted and forgiven in spite of everything we have done is simply too good to be true. Our choice becomes this: We can trust his retelling of the story, or we can trust our telling of our story.”<sup>27</sup> This obscures the demands of the law and the promise of the gospel. Believing a story where we are reconciled to God even if we are not Christians is not the Biblical message. We are wicked rebels who abide under God’s wrath unless we repent and believe the gospel. Never in the Book of Acts did any of the apostolic preachers proclaim, “Believe you are loved and accepted” as the terms of the gospel. They preached repentance as Christ told them to.

Bell writes, “When we choose God’s vision of who we are, we are living as God made us to live.”<sup>28</sup> But God’s vision of who we are is that unless we have repented, we are hopeless, wretched, without God in this world, dead in sin, and storing up wrath: “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5). Bell’s version is much more attractive: “And as we live in this life, in harmony with God’s intentions for us, the life of heaven becomes more and more present in our lives. Heaven comes to earth.”<sup>29</sup>

Bell makes it clear that he is more concerned with “hell on earth” than with what happens after this life: “What’s disturbing then is when people talk more about hell after this life than they do about hell here and now.”<sup>30</sup> But in the Bible the term for “hell” is Gehenna. Hades is where the ungodly go when they die to await the final judgment after the resurrection of the wicked. Here is what the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) says:

This distinction [between

Gehenna and Hades] is a). that Hades receives the ungodly only for the intervening period between death and resurrection, whereas Gehenna is their place of punishment in the last judgment; the judgment of the former is thus provisional but the torment of the latter eternal (Mk. 9:43 and par. 9:48). It is then b). that the souls of the ungodly are outside the body in Hades, whereas in Gehenna both body and soul, reunited at the resurrection, are destroyed by eternal fire (Mk. 9:43 and par., 45, 47 and par., 48; Mt. 10:28 and par.).<sup>31</sup>

Bell's teaching that heaven and hell come to earth depending on how we live now simply is not biblical. He says, "As a Christian, I want to do what I can to resist hell coming to earth. Poverty, injustice, suffering – they are all hells on earth, and as Christians we oppose them with all our energies."<sup>32</sup>

But the term for hell, Gehenna, is used 12 times in the New Testament, 11 of them by Jesus. Not once did He use the term to describe something that is now on earth or now coming to earth. He used it in this manner: "And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:30). In Bell's usage, losing body parts would be hell on earth. But Jesus' point was that it would be better to go through this life (which is temporary) maimed than to have a perfect body that is cast into hell (which is permanent). But Bell says, "For Jesus, this new kind of life in him is not about escaping this world but about making it a better place, here and now. The goal for Jesus isn't to get into heaven. The goal is to get heaven here."<sup>33</sup> Really? But Jesus said, "And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

The gospels simply do not teach Bell's ideas about heaven and hell coming to earth now depending on certain

actions. They teach the importance of eternity and the relative unimportance of our status now other than in how it affects us in eternity. But Bell continues to explain his "repainting" of "Elvis":

True spirituality then is not about escaping this world to some other place where we will be forever. A Christian is not someone who expects to spend forever in heaven there. A Christian is someone who anticipates spending forever here, in a new heaven that comes to earth. The goal isn't escaping this world but making the world the kind of place God can come to.<sup>34</sup>

To do this, according to *Velvet Elvis*, we need to become our "true selves": "And Jesus calls us to return to our true selves. The pure, whole people God originally intended us to be, before we veered off course. Somewhere in you is the you whom you were made to be."<sup>35</sup> This embracing of our identity and trusting we are loved supposedly brings heaven to earth: "That is what brings heaven to earth."<sup>36</sup> These types of statements, issued universally to all people, are not the universal call of the gospel. Bell's message, unlike the gospel found in the New Testament, is not how God has chosen to make dead sinners alive. A dead sinner is not going to bring heaven to earth by believing such things about himself or returning to his "true self." The fact is that our "true selves" are wicked rebels who deserve hell.

### CONCLUSION

In the world of art, there is nothing wrong with being abstract. People are free to paint as they wish. But the gospel claims to reveal truth that is necessary for salvation. Where we spend eternity rests on understanding and believing the gospel. Abstractions cannot declare God's unchanging revelation. As we have seen, Bell's painting bears no resemblance to the Biblical original.

It turns out that "Elvis" painted in abstract art could serve just as well to be JFK, Ronald Reagan, Marilyn Monroe

or Janice Joplin. Since paradoxes cannot express meaning, a theology of paradox can mean anything the reader's mind wants it to mean. Bell's "Christian" painting, done as it is in abstract art, serves merely to tickle the mind and the imagination, not to reveal anything in particular. So we must ask ourselves, should we consult the original that God's authoritative spokespersons gave us or should we embrace the abstract version of "Elvis" and hope that God is pleased with it? We should trust God's authoritative spokespersons.

### END NOTES

1. Rob Bell *Velvet Elvis – Rethinking the Christian Faith*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005) 11.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. 67, 68.
4. Ibid. 68.
5. See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Moody Press: Chicago, 1986) for an excellent description on how canonicity was determined.
6. Bell, *Elvis*, 28.
7. Systematic theology is an attempt to set forth the great doctrines of the Christian faith in a manner in which all pertinent Biblical and historical material is carefully considered. Being systematic means that important doctrines cannot be purposely left aside nor can important Biblical considerations be ignored.
8. Bell, *Elvis*, 32.
9. Ibid. 33.
10. Ibid. 34 emphasis his.
11. Ibid. 166.
12. Ibid. 34.
13. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1968) 77.
14. Ibid. 51
15. Bell, *Elvis*, 60.
16. Ibid. 55.
17. Ibid. 65.
18. I asked Doug Pagitt, another Emergent pastor, this question during a debate we had: "If someone wanted to start a Mormon Emergent Church, would that be valid.?" He

refused to answer.

19. Bell, *Elvis*, 66.

20. Ibid. 128.

21. Ibid. Bell leaves this question unanswered for his readers to ponder.

22. Ibid. 131.

23. Ibid. 133.

24. Ibid. 134.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid. 146.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid. 147.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid. 148.

31. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (1:658). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

32. Bell, *Elvis* 148.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid. 150.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid. 151.

### Critical Issues Commentary

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## Addendum -- Rob Bell "Undefined" Holiness by Bob DeWaay

In *Velvet Elvis*, Bell lists a number of transcendent experiences that he claims overwhelmed him to be in awe of God. The first one for Bell happened as a teenager at a concert performed by Irish rock group U2, where he was "overwhelmed with the word true."<sup>1</sup> These extraordinary experiences he also describes as "holy" and "sacred." The problem is that his usage has nothing to do with the Biblical meaning of the terms "holy" or "or sacred."

The Bible uses the term "holy" to refer to God and whatever He sets apart for His purposes. In the Old Testament, for example, the Sabbath was "holy" because God had designated it as set apart for Him, using terminology like, "holy Sabbath to the Lord" (Exodus 16:23). Items for sacred use in the tabernacle were designated as "holy." God is holy (Isaiah 6:3) and whatever things, places or people that God designates as holy are so because God declared them to be or caused them to be by some special action.

By definition, if something is holy it is separate from its opposite, the profane: "Moreover, they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23). God's holy name could be profaned, which is very sinful (Leviticus 22:32 and many other passages). Jerusalem is called the "holy city" in Old Testament and several

times in gospels and Revelation.

In the New Testament, the term "holy" is not used to designate things or places other than usages that are tied to the Old Testament, such as the temple and its services mentioned in Acts and Hebrews. The scriptures are called both "holy" and "sacred" (*hieros* is used for "sacred" only once -- 2Timothy 3:15 "sacred Scriptures"; elsewhere it means temple or temple service). But this designation refers not to pages with ink on them per se, but to the content of the inspired writings. All other uses of "holy" have to do with the church: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the holy law, redeemed persons, faith, prayer, and our holy calling. The term under the New Covenant does not refer to things and places other than when referring to those so designated under the Old Covenant, like Jerusalem and the temple.

Therefore, under the New Covenant there are no holy things or places. A church building is not a sacred space. Hymnals, candles, pews, or a communion table (items that might be used in a church) are not holy. No ground or land is "holy" compared to other places (other than God's continued plans for Israel, but that has to do with past promises and their fulfillment). No special location exists where one is going to meet God like Moses did at the burning bush. And one cannot go to a Christian store and buy a holy object. God makes people

holy by redeeming them through the blood atonement and cleansing them from their sins. If someone meets God in a saving way, it will be because they heard and believed the gospel, not because of some "transcendent moment" like Bell describes.

For example, Bell describes a memorable meeting with some friends in a restaurant: "And I'm sitting in this restaurant looking around the table, soaking it in, totally overwhelmed with the holiness of it all. The sacredness of the moment." [sic]<sup>2</sup> Bell then describes other experiences, such as being in a dirt-floored shack in Rwanda or at a funeral that he ends with "The ground was holy."<sup>3</sup> There was nothing uniquely Christian about any of the experiences he describes. He further describes conducting the wedding of a couple who wanted nothing to do with God, Jesus or the Bible. So they were married in a natural, beautiful place. Bell explained to them that whatever brought them together also holds all things together. They agreed to, "Call this glue, this force, 'God.'"<sup>4</sup> The resultant ceremony Bell describes as, "one of the most sacred things I have ever been a part of."<sup>5</sup>

The problem here is that only Bell's subjective impressions distinguish the holy and sacred. When Bell uses the term spiritual (which he also used to describe how the couple wanted the non-Christian wedding to be) he uses it in the secular manner as an Oprah

Winfrey would use it. He justifies his use of the term by saying that “God is present” everywhere in the world.

However, the doctrine of God’s omnipresence does not imply that “everything is spiritual” or “everything is holy.” Bell over emphasizes God’s immanence in a way that is in danger of crossing over into pantheism. God must be understood to be transcendent over and separate from the creation. The Bible says that Jesus is “separated from sinners” (Hebrews 7:27), and that before conversion we were separate from Christ and without God (Ephesians 2:12). Everything is not holy, everything is not sacred, and everything is not spiritual in the sense the Bible uses the terms. But Bell says that it is: “We throw ourselves into our work because everything is sacred.”<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, Bell is confusing common grace with saving grace. We can look at a sunset on a beautiful day and see that “the heavens declare the glory of God.” But the heavens speak this way to all people whether or not they recognize the true creator God. Paul says that this general revelation shows “God’s invisible attributes” (Romans 1:20). But Paul said that in the midst of a long litany about universal human sinfulness. Having a “transcendent moment” in which one realizes that some spiritual force exists that holds everything together, cannot save anyone and therefore cannot create holiness. Holiness only comes through the cleansing of the conscience by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 9:14). That only happens for those who repent and believe the gospel. Bell’s teaching obscures the difference between the holy and the profane. Common grace (that God shows kindness even to His enemies and sends rain on the just and unjust) does not create universal holiness.

To demonstrate how Bell confuses the Biblical idea of holiness, let me show you how he interprets the “holy ground” incident at the burning bush. Here is the *Velvet Elvis* version:

God tells Moses to take off his

sandals, for the ground he is standing on is holy. Moses has been tending sheep in this region for forty years. How many times has he passed this spot? How many times has he stood in this exact place? And now God tells him the ground is holy? Has the ground been holy the whole time and Moses is just becoming aware of it for the first time? Do you and I walk on holy ground all the time, but we are moving so fast and returning so many calls and writing so many emails and having such long list to get done that we miss it?<sup>7</sup>

In the context of this chapter Bell intends his readers to take these questions as rhetorical with the implied answer “yes.” But his exegesis of the Exodus account is inaccurate. He confuses general revelation with special revelation. At the burning bush Moses was the recipient of special revelation. God’s theophany made the ground holy compared to any other particular ground, not some heightened awareness on Moses’ part. That God created the world can be seen through general revelation. That Moses was called by God to be the mediator of the Old Covenant could only be known by special revelation. Slowing down to figuratively “smell the roses” will not reveal “holy ground.”

This is not the end of this serious category error. Using strange terminology about Jesus being the “life force” of nature and existence, Bell concludes that the wedding planners who did not want anything about Jesus or God are “resonating with Jesus whether they acknowledge it or not.”<sup>8</sup> He explains,

Jesus was up on that cliff with us that day. It is not that God is over here and real life is over there. If it is real, then it’s showing us God. It is not that passion and love and exhilaration are in one place and Jesus is somewhere else. Where you find those, you are finding God.<sup>9</sup>

These statements are false, because the Bible says that if we have not been made alive from the dead through a special work of grace through the gospel, we are “without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). God is not found on a cliff through resonating with nature and the “spiritual.” He is found through faith in the finished work of Christ.

So, by broadening terms like, “holy, sacred, and spiritual,” Bell has made them vacuous. His usage is not Biblical and implies a heightened sense of immanence at the expense of God’s transcendence that is reminiscent of theological liberalism or pantheism. In the Bible, God’s immanence and transcendence are both preserved: “*For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15).* But we only experience God’s holiness in a saving way by becoming repentant sinners who are “contrite and lowly in spirit.” If we proudly go our own way and reject God’s offer of salvation, the transcendent, Creator God will be our judge at the end of the age.

#### End Notes Addendum

1. Rob Bell *Velvet Elvis – Rethinking the Christian Faith*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005) 72.
2. *Ibid.* 73.
3. *Ibid.* 74, 75.
4. *Ibid.* 77.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* 84.
7. *Ibid.* 91.
8. *Ibid.* 92.
9. *Ibid.*

#### Critical Issues Commentary

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