



Rob Bell's Abstract "Elvis"

By Bob DeWaay

For the past two years I have researched the theology of the Emergent Church in preparation for a book I am writing. During that time I ignored Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis* because I was concentrating on other works of postmodern theology. Then someone loaned me Bell's video in which he uses subatomic physics to try to prove that, "everything is spiritual." After viewing it, I saw how seriously he is leading people astray. On a recent trip I finally read *Velvet Elvis*.

The literal "Velvet Elvis" is a particular portrayal of Elvis Presley crafted in velvet: Bell owns a copy. The art piece serves Bell's book as an analogy to the Christian faith. Bell claims that all versions of Christianity are paintings or portrayals like his velvet 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 who still can be seen in pictures 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.”^[i] 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) were involved in “rethinking.” I don’t deny that. But when he says that we have no objective means to tell 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.

The difference between me and Rob Bell is not just that I am 57 and he is much younger. The difference is this: I believe that inspired, authoritative revelation was given once for all and is contained in the Scriptures. And this implies that revelation is not an ongoing process. Bell, on the other hand, likens his view to the fluidity of jumping on a trampoline and calls my views and the views of theologians like me, “brickianity.” This [brickianity] he claims, is not good news but bad news about walls that keep people out.^[ii] 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 that needed to be justified biblically, Bell’s “Elvis” is based on a mysterious original: “The Christian faith is mysterious to the core.”^[iii] His misuse of the term “mysterious” results in a semantic slight 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.”^[iv] 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.

Rather than 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.”^[v] 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.”^[vi] He claims we need to quit trying to convert people and just change the world for better: “Jesus lives; here’s a toaster.”^[vii] Bell’s trampoline analogy starts out with a neo-orthodox understanding of a “leap” and ends in the social gospel. The result is nearly indistinguishable from the theological liberalism I was taught in my youth in the 1950’s and 60’s.

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 stated and unchanging revelation.

It turns out that "Elvis" painted in abstract art could serve just as well to be JFK, Reagan, Marilyn Monroe or Janice Joplin. Since paradoxes cannot express meaning, a theology of paradox can mean anything the mind of the reader 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 was given to us by God's authoritative spokespersons or should we embrace the abstract version of "Elvis" and hope that God is pleased with it? For anyone wishing to know the truth, the answer is obvious. We should trust God's authoritative spokespersons.

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- [i] Rob Bell *Velvet Elvis – Rethinking the Christian Faith*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005) 11.
[ii] Ibid. 28.
[iii] Ibid. 32.
[iv] Ibid. 33.
[v] Ibid. 34 emphasis his.
[vi] Ibid. 166.
[vii] 168.

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