

Review of Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*

By John L. Drury

I had a chance to read Rob Bell's book [Velvet Elvis](#) over Christmas break. I would like to add my own contribution to the now raging dialogue concerning its claims and implications. A quick glance of the reviews on [Amazon](#) will reveal a lack of mediating responses. Most reviews are either a 1 star indictment or a 5 star defense. Well, I intend to fill that gap with my own mediating perspective. In other words, I would give it 3 stars.

As with most thinkers, Bell's strengths are the flipside of his weakness. Specifically, I would like to note three of such prospects. I will discuss their corollary problems next week.

Prospects

(1) *Theology*

First of all, Bell has an uncanny grasp of what it means to *do* theology. His subtitle is instructive: *Repainting the Christian Faith*. He understands tradition as kinetic power that moves us forward into new developments. He grasps that the history of the Church is precisely the history of the *development* of doctrine. In particular, Bell makes us of the concept of "binding and loosing" as a practice of responsible interpretation of the Bible (ch. 2). The key word here is *responsibility*: the church in general and Bell in particular can and should take responsibility for their theological decisions. As the Jewish Christians in Acts 15 did, so we too must make decisions, claiming only that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Such a clarion call for responsible theological thinking is sorely needed.

(2) *Judaism*

Bell's particularly way of doing theology is by tapping into the Jewish roots of Christianity. Bell thankfully reminds us that Jesus was a Jew (too bad he didn't say that Jesus *is* a Jew, but more on that later). Familiarity with such Jewish roots provides a treasure-trove of exegetical insight (ch. 5-7). The result is the Bell actually deals with *actual Biblical texts*, making him the most "biblical" of the Emergent cadre of writers. Furthermore, such a focus on Jewish roots re-embeds the Christian faith in history (where it belongs), and thus brings with it a world-affirming spirituality sorely needed for the progeny of individualistic-forms of evangelicalism.

(3) *Jesus*

Bell is unquestionably a Jesus-centered thinker. He shares with many a focus on Jesus at the center of our faith, but with a detailed attention to Jesus' words and thoughts and deeds often lacking in most Jesus-talk. Building on his knowledge of Jewish backgrounds, Bell is able to get to the heart of Jesus' message within the context of the whole of Scripture, attends to specific Jesus-texts and their interpretation, and takes seriously the political aspect of Jesus' life. Such concrete advances among the typically shallow Jesus-people are a contribution for which I am grateful.

Problems

As it often goes, the strengths of a book turn out to be the flipside of its weakness. Specifically, I would like to note three problems of Bell's book [Velvet Elvis](#) that correlate directly to the prospects discussed [last week](#).

(1) *Theology*

Bell rightly calls for theology to go beyond tradition without leaving it behind. He beautifully describes doctrines as springs that give us energy to jump. Unfortunately, when it comes to actually doing theology, he only pays lip service to the tradition. For instance, in ch. 1 he puts himself in the line of Luther by the simplistic parallel that Luther changed things and now he is changing things. Doctrinal development is more complicated than that. One needs to really immerse him- or herself in the doctrinal tradition. Bell may have done this in some respects, but it certainly doesn't show. And there are cases where he has reinvented the wheel, which is not really development at all, but regression. For instance, he rightly captures a world-affirming eschatology in ch. 7. But a little help from Jonathan Edwards (or a host of other figures) could have helped him iron out some of the remaining wrinkles as well as kept him from making over-compensating moves. Repainting the Christian faith requires a thorough knowledge of the original painting, which includes the long history of Christian thought. Only then will we be sufficiently "trained by the masters" to pick up our own brush in the contemporary situation.

(2) *Judaism*

Although Bell helps to correct our perennial Israel-forgetfulness, he assumes a Jewish-Christian continuity that is historically and theologically dubious. Practically speaking, he encourages Christians to "play Jew." This is utterly offensive to still-walking-and-talking Jews who would prefer that we don't pretend to practice their religion and ours at the same time. Bell has gone half-way by acknowledging the Jewish background of Christianity. Now he needs to

go all the way by acknowledging the Jewish *neighbor* in our midst. Despite our shared roots, Jews remain a religious "other" to Christians, and it is our responsibility to respect that otherness. Blurring the lines not only hurts our relationship with God's chosen people but also risks our own identity as the Church of Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus is not just another Rabbi. Unfortunately, Bell's misconstrual of our relationship with Judaism leads him to such a Rabbi-Christology, which leads us to our last point...

(3) *Jesus*

Although Rob Bell certainly focuses on Jesus, he falls short of a true Christocentrism. In ch. 3, he explains the relationship of the divine Logos to the man Jesus in a way that the true, the good, and the beautiful are logically prior to the identity of Jesus Christ. We follow Jesus because he is true, good, and beautiful, rather than seeking truth, goodness, and beautiful out of our radical discipleship to this man who is God in the flesh. Although this may seem like a picky issue of priority, it has big implications. Why? Once some general principle is in control of Jesus, aspects of his story that don't fit well into the system get marginalized. Noting just one huge example: Bell's Jesus in *Velvet Elvis* is a Jesus without a Cross. Now Bell certainly speaks elsewhere about the death of Christ, but the fact that it can be left out of even a short book on the Christian faith is troublesome. It shows that Bell seeks the Jesus known via the bits-and-pieces of his sayings, having not yet discovered that the Cross is the string that holds these pearls of wisdom together.

Thus my review of *Velvet Elvis* in short would be to follow Bell's prospects in a way that does not fall into Bell's problems. *Read* Bell's book. Take his advice to read it *critically*. I hope that these warning will be a guide toward such a critically appreciative read.

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