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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18, 2006

Review of Velvet Elvis (Part One) - Prospects

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

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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.

Any thoughts?

Do you concur with my assessment so far?

Would you add any other points of strength?

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For part two of this review, click [here](#).

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posted by JohnLDrury @ [8:00 PM](#)

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11 Comments:

At [12:14 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [Devarim](#) said...

Good points. I would add that there is no gap between him and the common person. Most pastors and authors with his breadth of knowledge speak & write in language that's difficult for the masses to understand. He uses simple language to convey deep truths, something very few communicators do these days.

I'm anxious to hear his weaknesses, because I'm yet to find any. :)

At [6:38 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [Erik](#) said...

Thanks for the good and honest review. I haven't read this yet, but have wanted to for a while.

It feels to me as though your 3 star review is more 5 star, without the emotional backlash against a 1 star! Anyway...

Your three points are exactly why I like Rob. Glad to hear about this book from someone I trust.

At [8:04 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Well done in just putting part one out there without qualification for us to chew on.

I'm looking forward to part two. While there are many other factors to Rob "The Icon" Bell that make him an attractive speaker/writer these three SUBSTANTIVE issues needed to be clarified. Bell seems to not only be a popular thinker/speaker... but an important one.

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Of course, I'm looking forward to part two and hearing how that importance to many can become an double-edged sword.

I will add that when I read VElvis I was shocked that Bell may actually be a "better" writer than he is a speaker.

Scary! May the Holy Spirit guide him in using his influence.

At [8:37 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Davarim & Erik - You are right in seeing how much I like Bell. Come back next week to find out why I'd give him a 3.

Dave - He certainly is a good writer, and substantive to boot.

jld

At [9:09 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [Nathan Hart](#) said...

i've listened to Rob preach many times. and, living in western michigan as i did, i saw many pastors lament his popularity as they watched their twentysomethings all flee their sanctuaries toward Grandville and all things Rob Bell. but that's another point.

i'm not sure i find anything necessarily profound in his theology. or, perhaps that's the strength of it; it comes across as something i've always known because of his ability to communicate so well. in other words, i feel like everything i hear him say (or write) is something i already believe. maybe he's just that persuasive! :)

At [9:56 AM, January 19, 2006](#), [Brian Cooper](#) said...

One thing I liked about Bell's book is his ability to ask faith shaking questions. His intention isn't to guide you down a path of heresy, but to remind you that there are other logical ideas out there so you better know what you believe.



I've ran across some people that didn't like the book and some of them didn't like the probing questions. They thought that Bell was expressing his own theological views instead of trying to encourage the audience to realize there are other theological perspectives out there.

At [12:29 PM, January 19, 2006](#), [Nathan Hart](#) said...

i read some of those negative reviews on amazon. man, people really need to lighten up.

do not fear questions.

At [4:19 PM, January 19, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

Here's another strength or two of Rob Bell. Now, bear with me... this may seem unfair:

As he said at the catalyst conference a few years ago (no I didn't go, I just get stuff to listen to on cd from these folks), "are you smoking what you're selling?" I think he is. I believe what he says he believes, he believes. He seems (oh man, here comes an emergent buzz word).. well... authentic. Unlike many other well-known Preachers, he feels real to people. That's GOOD! Not the whole ball-game, but good.

He is in the midst of what he is about. What I mean is, and I am oversimplifying this to make a point, Brian McLaren is old. He is old and speaking to the young. Bell is young and he is speaking to mostly those in his general age group. Now that in itself isn't all that important, but what is a strength for him is that he is speaking of "what this generation wants" and "things are different for this group of people" and he is a part of that group. AT THE SAME TIME, that doesn't mean people who are older than 38 can't have an opinion, be right about it, and relate wonderfully to the young'ins. Look at John's dad. he speaks very well for the Emergents and the Boomers. But he spends a lot fo time with them. I don't trust people who write books for teens when they haven't been a teen for a hundred years

and couldn't tell you what punk music really is, much less have played in a punk band, like Rob Bell.

I applaud Drury the Elder for taking the time. I am not criticizing Boomers relating to Emergents.

At [6:15 PM, January 19, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

FINALLY We get an emergent who can write enjoyable prose! May he end the flood of emergents who cover up their writing-laziness by claiming they are founding some new sort of postmodern writing style. Welcome Rob bell to paper!

(Looking for the "rest of the story" next week--so far I'm with you and RB.

At [9:54 AM, January 21, 2006](#), [::athada::](#) said...

I vote "aye" for Bell.

With some caution.

Like KDrury cautions about being careful who you bring with you on your faith meltdowns, I caution Bell. Even his words in VELvis (I think): "Am I even a Christian anymore?" are potentially loaded.

Other than that, I have learned a TON from his teachings.

- 1) I love the focus on the Jewish-ness of Jesus. I almost NEVER got that at my church growing up.
- 2) I love his practical-ness ("orthopraxi-ness"?). He (and Mars Hill in general, judging on the songs my fiance says they teach the kids) is very focused on making the Kingdom of God a reality, as much as possible, on earth.
- 3) He's upfront and honest. He will preach the hard stuff.

At [8:27 PM, January 22, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I bought Velvel Elvis the other day. So far I'm enjoying it and learning alot. He certainly comes accros alot better studied and read than most popular christian authors.

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