

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2006

## Review of Velvet Elvis (Part Two) - 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](#).

### Problems

#### (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

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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

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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.

Any thoughts?

Do you concur with my assessment?

Any problems that you would add?

Labels: [Book Reviews](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [7:47 PM](#)

[22 comments](#)

## 22 Comments:

At [1:00 AM, January 26, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

I have not read Bell's book but now I want to - which I think speaks positively of your review...now I want to be part of the conversation.

At [9:06 AM, January 27, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Wow, didn't see that coming. I knew you were doing part two but I didn't know you would pull them from the same list of 3. Well crafted!

The line I most appreciate: "Repainting the Christian faith requires a thorough knowledge of the original painting." Thanks for bringing your "thorough knowledge" to the emerging table, John.

Here in West Michigan where The Icon (Bell) has his

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church, it seems like everyone has read it. Unfortunately everyone I debrief with seems to either fall to one ditch or the other: "I hated it and want to stone Rob Bell" or "I loved it and bought myself some Mars Hill brand Phlacteries." Thanks for providing some organized hooks to hang my own ambivelant reading of the book on. I agree that it should be read critically.

Of course, what book shouldn't? (You can read between the lines on that one.)

At [10:47 AM, January 27, 2006](#), [Kevin K. Wright](#) said...

Great post John. I think perhaps the Wesleyan Church should release book reviews of contemporary books that offer helpful advice as to the benefits and warnings. Often too many people do not read with a critical eye.

Here's something to chew on. Do you think that perhaps Bell is exactly right when he compares himself to Luther? I agree with you that offering a corrective necessitates a good comprehension of doctrinal tradition, however, once could argue that Luther was largely ignorant of tradition as he based much of his critique on Gabriel Biel's interpretation of Aquinas without actually reading Aquinas himself. Eithre way, you're absolutely right, one who has no grasp of the past is likely to make a string of overcompensations and thus espouse a whole new line of problems. You can have a reformation, but you better know what you're trying to reform.

At [11:34 AM, January 27, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Kevin -

Side pot on Luther:

To say Luther was ignorant of the tradition is an overcompensating move itself, a symptom of the post-



protestant air we emerging methodists breath.

First of all, Luther was steeped in Augustine, Bernard, and the medieval interp of the Scriptures. To compare his blindspots to Bell's is to miss the massive difference of the degree of ignorance.

Secondly, it is true that Luther knew Thomas only thru Biel, but Thomas was not yet "THE" tradition for Roman Catholics. Thomas did not take on canonical status of that sort until the 19th Century. So to say Luther didn't understand the tradition is merely to say he was a child of his time. Scholastic theology had denigrated to the likes of Biel, and needed corrected. If Luther had known Thomas, that would have been nice and may have helped center him. But the fact of the matter is he knew the tradition as it had come to him very well, and knew much (if not all) of the source of that tradition. Surely we should expect more from today's would-be reformers. But even a reformer with Luther's blind-spots would be lightyears beyond one with Bell's blinders on.

At [1:34 PM, January 27, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I guess I didn't see Bell as saying her was on the same level as Luther just doing a similar thing. When I blayed basketball in Jr High I was doing the same thing as Michel Jordan but common sense would make it clear that I'm not doing it on the same level.

At [2:56 PM, January 27, 2006](#), [Kevin K. Wright](#) said...

John,

Well said in regards to my earlier remarks. Quick question though. Do you think Bell knows "the tradition" as it has come to him very well? Is Bell merely a "child of his time" and if that's the case, what sickly children has the church birthed? I suppose we'd have to define what "the tradition" is first but that in itself is a question I've been wrestling

with. How do yo define tradition? Wesley, Luther, Aquinas, Cappadocian Fathers, etc? Furthermore, how do you convince an emergent, postmodern, evangelical, etc, that "the tradition" is even worth knowing and that a rejection of such might deny one's legitimacy when dealing with theological issues?

At [5:13 PM, January 27, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

The AJ Thomas -

You have made a helpful distinction that might actually highlight my original point. Bell claims to use the tradition to propell his developments. The problem with his mention of Luther is that it is only a FORMAL parallel, not a MATERIAL one. In other words, he is saying that his work is LIKE Luther's work, not the same in content or claiming to know or say what Luther said. It is such formal parallels that I am criticizing as an inadaquate appeal to tradition. We need to be more than inspired by the tradition; we need to be immersed in it.

Which brings us to Kevin's excellent question : .... [see next post]

At [5:14 PM, January 27, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Which brings us to Kevin's great question: What is the tradition? Why value tradition at all? These would be great questions to continue to pursue on this discussion string. The only thing I will say in the meantime is that to appeal to traditon without really dealing with it is a facade and thus "inauthentic" (to use an emergent value). Maybe we should ignore the tradition - that is an option. But paying lip service without doing the hard work of learning from the masters stikes me as irrelevant at best and deceptive at worst.

At [1:03 PM, January 30, 2006](#), [Nathan Hart](#) said...

John Drury: "Noting just one huge example: Bell's Jesus in Velvet Elvis is a Jesus without a Cross."

Rob Bell: "In one sense, salvation is a legal transaction. Humans are guilty because of our sin, and God is the judge who has to deal with sin because he is holy and any act of sin goes against his core nature. He has to deal with it. Enter Jesus, who dies on the cross in our place. Jesus gets what we deserve; we get what Jesus deserved." --Velvet Elvis, pg 107

d'oh! :)

At [1:42 PM, January 30, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

nate,

Thanks. Yes, he certainly speaks of the cross. I overstated my case by saying the cross was absent from the book. Also, I have heard an excellent sermon by him on sacrificial love of the cross. He's great on the topic.

My concern is more how sidelined it is to his whole programme. The Cross of Christ does not bear centrality; the teachings of Christ do for him. That's not automatically problematic, but it is certainly a warning for readers to not overcompensate at his (unintended) behest.

Thanks Nate. ... especially for reading my critical reading critically :-)

At [2:41 PM, January 30, 2006](#), [Nathan Hart](#) said...

i really wasn't intending to be a pain in the arse. i was just reading that page today and remembered your critique as i read it.

word.

At [3:31 PM, January 30, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

interesting point about the Cross not being central to a book on "repainting the Christian faith." I like Rob, a lot, but I don't know how interested in a Faith that is beautiful and artsy and other things that I love, but does not highlight the cross as the focal object of the beauty.

surely not his point, but it is interesting how his book played out, as well as his NOOMA videos... not a lot of death-talk there.

At [6:08 PM, January 30, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Nate & Jay, (and everybody else)

This whole line of discussion (re: the the cross in Bell's work) brings to mind an important distinction in critical engagement of other thinkers: the difference between the absence of a theme and the place of a theme.

It is one thing to assert the absence of a theme. If such was the case, it would be a devastating critique. However, such is seldom the case. The thinker under investigation may have dealt with it elsewhere or in an indirect way. Such sweeping critiques should be approached with caution.

It is another thing to say a thinker has sidelined or subordinated a theme. This is a more careful criticism, but also more difficult to execute. Why? Because one must carefully interpret the author to understand where he or she has placed the emphasis, and clearly locate where and how the thinker deals with the topic. Furthermore, one must make a case that the said theme ought to be central. Maybe the sideline is the proper location.

So although this mode of criticism is more difficult, it is

much better because it leads us to deeper questions, which is why we engage in criticism in the first place (not to be "critical" but to go deeper in our own thinking by active interplay with another thinker). May we all aspire to be such perceptive critics of our fellow workers in the vineyard.

This distinction brought to you by Kellog's, making arguments work better for over 50 years. ;-)

At [12:42 PM, January 31, 2006](#), [Nathan](#) said...

interesting distinction.

i grew up in Rob Bell's world, that is, West Michigan. i have a guess as to what MIGHT be partly at work in Bell's book. for people in West Michigan, the Cross is practically hanging over their head. well, it is literally hanging over their head on the ubiquitous churches in the area, and metaphorically hanging over the collective conscience of the populace. seriously, i didn't "know" that there were people who didn't know the gospel until i moved away from West Michigan.

i'm just wondering if, in Rob's world, everything said about Jesus/Christianity is kind of understood to reside beneath this overshadowing presence that "everyone knows" already.

if this is the case, it's clearly an oversight for a book which will of course be purchased OUTside the W Mich vicinity, but perhaps not a deliberate, intentional "sidelining" of a theme?

At [1:03 PM, January 31, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

nate,

that is a helpful contextual reminder! that may very well account for the disproportionality.

john

At [4:31 PM, February 01, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

I had a conversation about this topic of "the missing cross" yesterday after watching the two new NNOMA dvd's with some friends (both well-read, one of which is an author, and both work in the Christian marketplace, like me).

what we came up with (as guesses, of course) is that Rob is probably operating with some assumptions. assuming you know a bit about the faith before going through his work. assuming the artful way he presents topics are made richer by your existing Christian framework. assuming that everyone is as tired of the same-old same-old sermons on Jesus and His cross as Bell may have been. not that the topic isn't worthwhile, but maybe it was OK to talk about other things, in the context of understanding the sacrifice portion of Christianity.

guesses.

and I am definitely of the "sidelined" variety of "critique." i was overstating because his work is something i really appreciate and love... but a new believer would be missing out on some pretty foundational stuff, in my non-professional non-scholarly opinion.

At [5:22 PM, February 03, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

I read this book in September, and I need to add to this conversation that God used it to bring new life to my spiritual being.

I'd been working in ministry for about three years when this past summer I had one of those "straw that broke the camel's back" experiences. A leader in our denomination found out what curriculum I was planning to use for the fall and began hammering away at what he called the "gross inadequacies" and how I planned to compensate for

the apparent lack of complete truth. (Evil baptist curriculum) I was frustrated beyond belief. By his assessment, any curriculum (except maybe one written by him) would have been found lacking. I was ready to quit. Was this really what the Wesleyan church was all about? Recreating little Wesleyans to believe that our particular understanding of scripture is the only true and correct understanding? Then, on a quick browse through our local book store, this book literally fell off the shelf into my hands. Rob Bell was completely unknown to me, so I began reading with NO preconceived notions about what I would learn.

It became obvious to me that no, there are still plenty of Christians out there who don't share the narrow minded view that we in the fill-in-the-blank church have defined God more accurately than some other denom., person or church. I'm not sure I can accurately put into words the realization that took place as I read Bell's book. It was like I suddenly took permission to believe in the mysterious instead of the constant need to define and explain. My Bible reading became an exploration of questions instead of a quest to make everything logical. My ministry became more about helping children discover the wonder of God and less about teaching doctrine (that I supposedly have all wrong anyway). I still don't know much of who Rob Bell is, nor do I care to necessarily, but I've gained a new understanding of the God he writes about.

Freeing.

That's the word that comes to mind when I consider the book as a whole.

At [10:36 AM, February 04, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

John, your excellent and thoughtful review has inspired an excellent and thoughtful discussion here that has enlightened and expanded my mind theologically--which was your intention I suspect--thanks!

At [1:45 PM, February 06, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

a slight tangent -

The cross is certainly fundamental to our faith. I'm curious as to how fundamental it is to a mundane life, however ... for instance, I don't tend to think about the cross when I'm out shopping for eggs - or pushing my son on the swings - or watching a movie - or driving down the road. However, Christ's life and example have a far greater impact on my interactions with everyday life. For instance, "How should I treat the fellow driver or grocery store attendant?" or "How much love shall I show my son?"

An anecdote also comes to mind. I had a choir teacher at IWU who used to say this when the choir wasn't "working hard enough" : "I'm so glad my God didn't only give 50% on the cross." I wonder if Rob's seeming marginalization of the cross is a reaction to this type of thinking.

At [9:48 PM, February 09, 2006](#), [derek bethay](#) said...

I had a choir teacher at IWU who used to say this when the choir wasn't "working hard enough" : "I'm so glad my God didn't only give 50% on the cross."

Are you SERIOUS? That is an utterly vulgar statement to make. What a pathetic attempt to motivate people by comparing the effort they are putting forth to the sacrifice that Christ made on the cross. Despicable. I think I can probably guess who said this too... the same person who, calls the choral the "Cream of the crop of IWU!"???

At [9:34 AM, February 10, 2006](#), [daniel](#) said...

Derek - yes, I'm sure we're thinking of the same GUY.

It's nice to read someone else write the same things that I was thinking at the time.

At [1:23 AM, February 11, 2006](#), [Tony Myles](#) said...

Good catch, John... a lot of this Q&A has to be kicked at. For instance, the whole trampoline versus bricks metaphor is a good one. And yet unless a trampoline has a foundation (perhaps a "brick") you will bounce off in an unintended direction.

I was chatting with Rob Bell a few weeks ago... I mention that because I was, but also because it makes me sound good... anyway, I was chatting with Rob Bell a few weeks ago about something unrelated and then the topic of fundies came up. He mentioned how people are always trying to get him to say the "right" buzz words (i.e. "Salvation is through Jesus Christ alone") whereas his spin is to not deny that but to not put God into a box either. As a result, he ends up saying things like, "Why would I want to limit my understanding of God to what one verse says about him?" (My paraphrase, by the way)

My family has been blessed by Mars Hill this past year, but as with any of us who administer the word... I always have my radar up.

So far it hasn't gone off in service, but it's come close.

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