

Book Review

Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
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Conceived in broad, creative, and curious strokes, Rob Bell's, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, is a valuable and interesting work. It is witty and caring and its design is sure to engage the GenX & Y audience. Most importantly, it affords us the opportunity to preview the repainting of the Christian Faith for a new generation of "seekers" who find themselves at a distance from or marginalized by "institutionalized" Christianity or those who do not "buy-into" what they consider are its dominant assumptions. Just like the outmoded painting of Elvis Bell discovered in his basement, the title of his book serves as the metaphor for the allegedly outmoded ways of thinking about Christianity. Thus, Bell invites his readers to a paint job, to join in a new faith-reforming journey, and to test, probe, and discuss what he has written. "Don't swallow it uncritically. Think about it. Wrestle with it" (back cover). Bell, a voluble pastor, broadens Christian discourse far beyond normative ecclesial theology and puts forth his struggles with many questions which I would compact into, "What will it take to meaningfully connect my postmodern age with Jesus?" and "What do I need to do to make this connection work in peoples' lives?" Pragmatists, like contextualists, tend to paint/package things in ways that will help them achieve their ends. The book is interesting because in answering these questions, Bell demonstrates the extent to which he desires to renovate the Christian Faith in hopes of making it more appealing to "seekers" and to entice them to tag along on the journey of faith.

Bell states that he is part of the "reforming" tradition—he invokes Luther—and says he embraces "the need to keep painting, to keep reforming. . . . I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived, and explained" (12). Notice Bell's equating painting with reforming and his argument (which reduces to an instance of *modus ponens*) that just as Luther's protestations against Roman Catholicism resulted in a new theological movement--and Bell says that he is part of this reforming tradition--so Bell's tradition will similarly result in a new theological movement for today. Perhaps. However, we must remember that Luther did not succeed in reforming Catholicism. Instead, he rediscovered and popularized the Bible, demonstrated its use as the objective standard against which all theologizing is measured, and initiated the Protestant evangelical movement in territories where the secular ruler or magistracy was not implacably opposed to his rediscovery of the central teaching of the "the gospel": that one is saved not by what one does, but by what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Does Bell's new movement include or exclude any of these theological points? When Bell broadens his reforming reference and indicates he is learning that his "tradition includes the rabbis and reformers and revolutionaries and monks and nuns and pastors and writers and philosophers and artists and every person everywhere who

has asked big questions of a big God. . . . Welcome to my Velvet Elvis” (14), the reader beholds a shell game. Bell elusively relocates the evangelical pea of tradition under an all-encompassing shell. This point suggests several quibbles: either Bell misunderstands the depth, breadth, and limits of reforming activities, including Luther’s, or, he prefers simply to lump all reformers/painters—no matter what their ilk—into the same theological/philosophical camp, or both. Such theological/philosophical inclusiveness signals his indirect use of the *argumentum ad populum* (of the bandwagon variety, reinforcing the contemporary *vox populi*) and the theological *bricolage* to follow; surely an *oeuvre en collage* to appeal to the GenX & Y outlook in general—but what of his theology—in particular? This review could cover all the theological ideas addressed in the book’s pages; they span the gamut running from bibliology, soteriology and harmatology, to epistemology and peripatology and much else besides. And while there is not a sustained argument running through the book to assess critically, I will instead provide a brief account of one of its leading revisional statements—the concept of faith itself—and then take up the invitation to converse.

Before we examine Bell’s theological artistry, I want to reiterate the importance of portraying the eternal truths in a meaningful, accessible rendition for today’s audiences. This review does not intend to give the appearance of future-proofing evangelicalism to protect it from prospective positive developments, especially those improvements that have the potential of curbing a very common affliction within today’s evangelicalism, the mortal sin of *taedium spirituale* (spiritual boredom) or the inaction of God’s “frozen” people in the presence of injustice, poverty, or oppression. This review intends to address the artistic ability of the author to render faithfully those eternal truths in a recognizable fashion so that they are meaningful, relevant, and representative of the best of the evangelical tradition and ethos. Bell and his counterparts may prove to be some of the best short- and long-term contacts with the postmodern mindset. My interest is to join in the postmodern conversation and journey with Bell, et al., to reason and discern together how we might structure a mutually beneficial dialogue and *rapprochement* in order that evangelicalism not become polarized around yet another set of theological points. When writing a book review or review essay of several books on the same topic, one generally presumes that the author(s) will read it and that a dialogue between author and reviewer might develop. My hope is that such a dialogue develops in order that we can discover how might we best move together in our common theological task: to lead individuals to the Master Painter—the God who revealed himself in the living Word, Jesus Christ, through the written Word, Holy Scripture—who variously paints himself on the canvas of the world and our lives. In our great effort to reach those on the postmodern terrain, hopefully in a more unified fashion—one that demonstrates a genuine understanding and respect for one another without either of us succumbing to pyrrhic victories—we ought to assess the efficacy of any repainted presentation.

In his first chapter “Jump” and at various points throughout the book, Bell concerns himself with repainting the concept of faith itself. He correctly reminds us not to substitute doctrine for God or Jesus, but he resorts to the fallacy of the straw man by eschewing several examples of people and churches that appear to absolutize doctrine when in fact they follow the evangelical inclination of using doctrine as a structural aid for faith. Bell likens their use of doctrine to “bricks.” The analogy he offers instead is a trampoline, where the springs are “statements and beliefs about our faith. . . . the doctrines of the Christian faith” (22). His charge is that the faith-talk of “brickianity” (his word) is rigid and fixed (notice the *persuasive definition* chosen to engender an unfavorable attitude toward what it denotes). The faith of trampolinianity (my word, and a *stipulative definition*) allows flexibility, fun, and the continuation of doubts and questions. Remove one brick in the former and “the whole wall starts to crumble” (26). Remove or damage a spring or two in the latter, and one can still enjoy the trampoline.

In brickianity it is possible to assent to the right doctrines and yet “not live as Jesus teaches us to live” (35). But in trampolinianity, “You don’t have to know anything about the springs to pursue living ‘the way’” (34) as it is “less and less about talking, and more and more about the experience we are actually having” (35). Thus, Bell not only miscasts the orthodox concept of faith in order to more easily assail it, but then demolishes his distorted concept and draws the conclusion that faith has a better chance of surviving if the analogy of a trampoline is used. As well, in the process he demonstrates the postmodern preference/move for the absorption of knowledge into experience and the experience of an experiential faith (to which Jean Baudrillard, the High Priest of postmodernism would cry out, «*Il est absolument dans la simulation!*»). This process absolutizes human experience as the referent for relating to God; even above God’s self-disclosure and contributes to the further severing of faith from knowledge and reason that began with Schlieremacher, James, and Otto.

For the sake of our theological bearings, not to narrow Christian discourse and exclude faithful minds, the Protestant orthodox concept of faith traditionally involves several elements. First, is *notitia* (“knowledge”—the intellectual element and its objective aspect, relating primarily to the object of faith, Jesus Christ, and his mediatorial work), second, *assensus* (“assent”—the volitional element, that subjective aspect where the believer personalizes Christ’s work “for herself”), and finally, *fiducia* (“trust”—the confidence element that has the aspect of a rooted relationship with God in Christ). And since an appeal was previously made to Luther, the reformer defined faith as “a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his [or her] life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men [*sic*] glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures” (*Luther’s Works*, Word and Sacrament I, “Prefaces to the New Testament,” XXXV:370-371). To place the Catholic (Augustinian) concept of faith on our map, it includes the four-fold facet of God as the object of belief: *Credere Deo* (“to believe by means of God”), *Credere Deum* (“to believe God”), *Credere in Deum* (“to believe in God), and *Credendo in Deum ire* (“to go on by believing in God”). Even Eastern Orthodox theologians recognize the need to confirm knowledge acquired through their ecclesial experience with the Scriptures. Thus, these Augustinian/Anselmian (*fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding) traditions are typically not primarily concerned with a given faith experience but with a given someone. This Someone, whose witness and authority is the issue on which the above traditions focus and to which they respond in the manner of faith described above, is the One whose testimony the believer accepts as true and real; this Someone is God himself.

The current vernacular also clearly understands the human response to God as the object of faith. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (1995) defines faith in terms of “confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing.” And when the term “orthodox” is used to modify “faith” adjectivally, it stresses the lasting and static quality of what is believed—that is, for Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox—the objective content of faith. Both the object and the content tend to become lost in any shift toward a subjective, experiential view of faith. When we place the subjectivity of faith in ascendancy over knowledge, assent, and trust, when a subtle shift in emphasis takes place away from the object of faith and toward a faith experience, it exchanges the subject as the referent for the depth of meaning in place of the object.

Therefore, among his assertions that, “Whatever those things are that make you feel fully alive and like the universe is ultimately a good place and you are not alone, I need a faith that doesn’t deny these moments but embraces them. . . . They can’t be experiences that distract from ‘real’ faith. These

[experiential] moments can't exist on the edges, because they are part of our faith. A spirituality that is real will have to make sense of them and show us how they fit" (74), Bell sounds like the nineteenth century pastors and theologians who had a tremendous interest in and emphasis on interiority and the subjectivity of faith. Next, we learn that beyond the autonomous subjective faith of the individual there is a collective faith, "So many of us have been conditioned to think of our faith as solely an issue of us and God. But faith is a communal experience. A shared journey" (90). As a shared experience and considering other similar references, I believe he is adding a streak of a collective effervescence and the notion of a shared mediation of the sacred. Consequently, in such fashion faith is further subjectivized where it becomes a collective experience—*sui generis*. How does Bell's notion differ from the Durkheimian view of religious experience being nothing more than a feeling which a collectivity inspires in its members and projects out of its collective consciousness, objectifies it, and makes it sacred?

To fuzzify things a bit more, Bell never defines the content of "'real' faith," nor does he provide tools that may be used to articulate the faith and so understand it better. This is perfectly understandable, because to give clear structure and content to the concept of faith is to be involved in doctrine, in the very "brickianity" he desires to avoid. Yet, absent a clear articulation of what "'real' faith" consists, how is one able to protect herself from those experiences that might distract her from it? Furthermore, absent an explicit depiction, one is able to add to it, detract from it, or contrive its essence into something else. This is exactly what Bell proceeds to do by leading us to believe that in addition to experience and doubt, faith contains an element of mystery. "The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails" (32). "The mystery is the truth" (33). I suggest that in addition to painting over knowledge with experience, assent is painted over with "mystery" and trust with "doubt." "The very nature of orthodox Christian faith is that we never come to the end. It begs for more. More discussion, more inquiry, more debate, more questions [resulting from doubt?] Being a Christian then is more about celebrating mystery than conquering it" (34). Actually, the very nature of orthodox faith is more paradoxical, than mystical. It is two sides of the same coin, so to speak. In its New Testament expression, we find on one side faith is an unmerited gift, given freely by God, and not in any sense the product of human effort (Eph. 2:8-9). On the opposite side, we find that we are encouraged, indeed commanded, to believe the Gospel of Christ (Acts 16:30-31). Ultimately, and without questioning Bell's personal faith, the type of faith described in his book does not seek understanding. It sounds as if the theological movement to which Bell refers sees faith in terms of experience, mystery, and doubt. He has painted over the systematic theological expression of faith with an alluring postmodern preference for experience, a prominent place for doubt, and the need for mystery to "fit." In this theological program, experience supplants knowledge, the subject supplants the object of faith and belief as its priority gives way to the ascendancy of experience, the personalization of assent is exchanged for a personal celebration of mystery which veils truth in its construct, and doubt supplants trust.

The concerns at this point include the questions: Is it possible for this understanding of faith to have a sustaining and assuring effect in the life of the postmodern believer or is it a presumptuous type of faith without an ultimate, objective concern? The acid test of such faith, of course, is to subject it to trying times, despair and despondency. How does it stand up? Does it retreat, surrender, or make the believer sense she is falling upon herself? Is experience, doubt, and mystery able to mature or evolve into a personal commitment that has the ability to respond meaningfully to our age's growing sense of failure? Perhaps most importantly, will this construct of faith provide what the Scriptures promise or will it prove transitory, like the seed sown on rocky soil that has all the signs of life, but it does not

persevere? The answers to these questions are not readily apparent in Bell's *objet d'art*. These queries would certainly provoke a very valuable discussion. At this point, permit me to close with the primary particulars concerning the potential second-order-of-effects that may result from contriving faith in such a fashion in the life of believers.

First, considering experience, we do not want to jettison human experience altogether, but in any postmodern premium on experience we want to understand its role and its limitations in a religious construct. As I have written elsewhere regarding the importance of experience, Wilhelm Herrmann (Barth and Bultmann's mentor at Marburg) had similar struggles against the experiential *Zeitgeist* of nineteenth century theology and philosophy. His lament over his age was, in a sense, no different from the shared modern and postmodern mindful believers' over ours: "In our postmodern age our struggle is, as Herrmann's was, against the tide of subjectivity and individualism, mysticism and dogmatism. The importance of personal religious experience of which Herrmann gives positive explanation is bound with the affirmation that the subjective experiences of a personal Christianity cannot be alienated from the objective source that draws us into such experiences, nor can they be isolated from the thoughts that Christian doctrine gives expression to as its object and content of faith." (Robert Hernán Cubillos, "Herrmann's *Communion of the Christian with God: Contributions to an Evangelical Perspective on the Importance of Experience and the 'Inner Life' of Jesus?*" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/2 [1990] 187). Thus, my concern is that when religious experience—whether postmodern or our exalted and lowly religious experiences—is made the measure of belief, the second-order-of-effect is that we are involved in a dubious dependence on the "ups" and "downs" of our psyche, of our subjectivity.

Second, if by "doubt" Bell simply means that temporary swaggering of belief between "Yes" and "No" while pressing hard for answers as opposed to an arrogant denial or negation of belief, we need not allege postmodern rebelliousness against God. If, however, Bell is leaning toward the latter, I would suggest that to minister to an uncertain postmodern faith where doubt persists and belief is suspended, we encourage the requirement of courage—as Tillich did—to supplement faith. I would also remind that the second-order-of-effect of a sustained flirtation with doubt—while intellectually entertaining (postmoderns read here "fun")—can be a short easy slide leading to unbelief and hopelessness (postmoderns may not see the slope as slippery).

Third, when we use the word "mystery" we need to distinguish between divine mystery and human perception of mystery. The concept of mystery comprises man-made or fabricated mystery and the mystery that is encountered by us. The former is always dependent on the latter and to miss this distinction can mean that we are avoiding an unsolved problem, or it can mean that we are dodging the difficulties of a problem we have raised ourselves that is entirely solvable. Indeed, it is certainly open to question whether the problem of mysteries of God has been treated rightly in the history of theology. Nonetheless, when treating mystery as an element of faith, as that which we "celebrate" (34) versus that which we can understand, Bell is referring to the mysterious sense of God's sacredness at the core of existence. He does not refer to the traditional theological sense of immanence and transcendence but "Wherever you find . . . passion and love and exhilaration . . . you are finding God" (92). The second-order-of-effect of painting with the brush of mystery in such a fashion leads to either narrowly placing God or his holiness in particular situations and/or geographical locations, as Bell does, or broadly, and worse, to joining a nearly emanational pantheism of the Plotinian variety. The result is a refashioning of the personal, relational aspect between believers and God into an experience of God capable of

being shared unbelievers as the World Soul, which contains all souls as part of its genera.

In sum, our mutual concern is to identify and encourage authentic faith, to stimulate conversation regarding such faith, and not to take theological sides. The compacted questions with which we began truly are the vital questions in this postmodern hour: “What will it take to meaningfully connect my postmodern age with Jesus?” and “What do I need to do to make this connection work in peoples’ lives?” In an attempt to answer these questions, I depart from Bell with the contention that his repainted concept of faith proves to be an unsatisfactory replacement for orthodox faith and appears to be a contrivance of faith without belief; there is little or no reliable content to such faith. If a generation of believers is opting for such a faith, the theological stakes for those earnest souls who hold such notions of faith could not be higher. Yet I believe we share the agreement that Scripture is replete with forewarnings about those who declare knowledge of God but show little evidence of understanding the way of Christ sufficient to orient their lives and make them pleasing to God. Based upon his writing, I believe Bell would also agree (at least in principle) that God’s work of salvation is given whole and complete to the believer in this life, but it is not possessed irrevocably until the believer’s faith in God’s trustworthiness has been tested and retested in life and yet remains resolute. Bell is correct that many of today’s churches are not sufficiently hospitable and welcoming to the hurt cynic and earnest doubter; shame on us, and Lord forgive us! Bell’s repainting church culture as a redemptive refuge along with his encouragement for us to avoid a pretentious dogmatism and to realize that faith is not the rational acceptance of creedal formulae are much needed brush marks. Indeed, we must speak to the present postmodern condition and offer today’s seekers substantive support in their journey toward meaning with a faith that accommodates their questions and non-Pyrrhonian epigrammatic degrees of doubt; one that actively seeks responsible answers for life—the authentic sort of faith that will not be found wanting in the hour of one’s death. Closer looks at the original painting belie such retouched interpretations.