

## **Paintings with Holes: A Review of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis***

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In his book *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, Rob Bell presents his picture of the faith, including doctrines that are flexible like springs, continual reinterpretations of the Bible, truth that transcends the Christian religion, and a goal of serving others to bring heaven to earth. While he has some good things to say, his main faults are to emphasize experience, interpretation, and doubt over the propositional truth of the Bible and doctrine, downplay the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to salvation, and minimize the importance of Christ's death as taking the wrath of God in our place.

The first two chapters are about faith and the Bible, recasting the former as paradoxical and experiential and the latter as subject to new interpretations, losing in the process the firmness of doctrine and Biblical truth. Bell compares faith to a way of life in accord with reality (21) or to jumping on a trampoline (22). He explains that the doctrines of faith are like springs which are not God but "statements and beliefs *about* our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing in our jumping." Unlike God, they "aren't absolutes," because God is bigger than they are and cannot be confined by them (23). But Kevin DeYoung, in *Why We're Not Emergent*, argues that loving God makes sense only if one knows things about him, and that "He can use human language to communicate truth about Himself that is accurate and knowable" (36-37). Doctrines are not peripheral; they summarize God's revelation about himself so his people can know and trust him. Bell implies that if one essential doctrine, such as the virgin birth, were questioned, the most important question would still be "Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?" (26-27). But in fact, if the virgin birth were not true, Jesus would

not have been conceived by the Holy Spirit, he would not be God, his death would not save sinners, God's wrath would still be on mankind, and no one could live the right way. The essential doctrines of Christianity are not dispensable springs; they are God's revelation to his people without which no one can be saved.

Without the foundation of God's revelation, Bell's painting of faith includes a celebration of questioning as a healthy part of not having "all the answers" (30). Questioning, he says, is "central to faith," displays humility, and causes Christians to look "outside of themselves for guidance" (30). It "frees us from having to have it all figured out" (31). He goes on to explain that the Bible contains a sort of mystery that is not meant to be solved (32). DeYoung answers this issue as well, pointing out that if we are to have mercy on those who doubt, as Jude 22 says, that indicates that "doubt is something we are supposed to work through and fight against" (50). And the end goal is "a place where the faith will become sight" (51). Certainly we should not judge those who are struggling. But how can we look for guidance to a God we don't believe? And how is it freeing to not figure out what God has expressly told us? Perhaps there is a reason that mysteries always get solved in the movies. God revealed himself to his people so that they would have enough "figured out" to trust him and be saved.

The Bible, according to Bell in his second chapter, is subject to similar uncertainty, because it is continually being reinterpreted. Bell lists all the ways the Bible has been used to support people's various opinions and agendas (44). His solution is to explain that Jesus, as a rabbi, had authority to interpret the Bible, and he gave that authority to his people in the form of the keys of the kingdom, so that they could make new interpretations whenever they thought it best (50). It is now the job of communities

to reinterpret (52). It is true that the Bible cannot be read without some bias or interpretation, but as DeYoung notes, the very fact that Bell condemns the use of the Bible to support slavery shows that there are right and wrong interpretations (83). What if communities of Christians were to use their power to decide the Bible supported slavery? Would that "binding" be bound in heaven? This would place the ultimate authority in communities, instead of in God's revealed word. On the other hand, if Scripture is used to interpret itself, it is the ultimate authority, by which interpretations are judged as more or less accurate according to God's revealed truth.

With such a loose view of Scripture and doctrine, it is not surprising that Bell downplays the uniqueness of Christianity as the way of salvation. Back in chapter one, he says that Jesus's statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," was not a claim "about one religion being better than all other religions" but a claim that his way is "the best possible way for a person to live" (21). One wonders if there is even a difference between these two. But in chapter three he emphasizes the presence of truth and God in all cultures, rejecting the need to "take Jesus" to them, and thus devaluing the proclamation of the gospel for salvation (88). Unbelievers sense the presence of God, he says, and discern the blueprint of Jesus in creation (78, 82). Evangelism is pointing out what is already there (88). He is right to encourage Christians to find the truth and beauty that is present everywhere by general revelation. But what he misses is the special revelation of the gospel, which is not present everywhere, and without which no one will be saved. Jesus didn't just say he was the way, but also, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is not just a better way. Those who do not know him cannot know the Father.

Not only does Bell dislike doctrine and compromise on the uniqueness of the gospel, he habitually deemphasizes the substitutionary death of Christ, arguing for things which are not bad in themselves but which lose their value apart from the gospel. First, in chapter four, he emphasizes the need for holistic restoration and the application of salvation to every part of the soul (107). To his credit, he acknowledges the legal substitution of the cross (107), and does not reduce it to a mere moral example, as some other emergent authors have done (DeYoung 193). The problem is that he makes a distinction between a "faith defined solely in legal terms" and a "larger picture of salvation" which "describes all of creation being restored" (109). His argument is that by emphasizing penal substitution too much one can neglect holistic healing and "be saved and not be a healthy, whole, life-giving person" (110). But this is an artificial separation. Penal substitution is emphasized not because it is the only interpretation, but because it is the central one, the "heartbeat of the gospel" as DeYoung calls it, from which every other part flows, and without which no other part can stand (193). Healing every part of the soul is vital, but it is achieved through penal substitution, not by minimizing it.

Second, in chapter six, by emphasizing and making universal the new life we have in Christ, Bell ends up placing the responsibility for salvation in the hands of sinners who, as he says in chapter five, don't trust themselves enough (134). He bemoans cycles of guilt that some Christians experience, and explains that such Christians ought to realize the new life they have in Christ, confess their sin, thank God for forgiveness, and then move on (138-144). All of this is true and important, and some Christians really do need to hear and believe that in Christ they are no longer enslaved to their old ways. But next Bell says that Jesus died for everyone, so that all are forgiven, but that some will end

up in hell, and "The difference is how we choose to live" (146). In fact, he describes heaven and hell as realms brought to earth by whether we choose to live how God intended us to or not (147). The problem here is that Bell left out Christ's payment for our sins by enduring God's wrath. As a result, salvation becomes a matter of human choices instead of God's work, and unless hell has nothing to do with God's wrath, those forgiven who end up there are facing the wrath that Christ already took for them. But DeYoung lists eight reasons why hell must be God's wrath (198-200). Once again, good teaching without the core doctrines the gospel falls to pieces. Salvation becomes a matter of works, and sinners learn, "God has faith in me" (134).

Finally, in chapter seven, Bell emphasizes world restoration and serving all people at the expense of the proclamation of the gospel for salvation. He portrays Christ as a new, countercultural Caesar who came to restore God's intention for the world (162). The purpose of predestination, he says, is to bless others, and the good news is as much for those served by Christians as for Christians themselves (165-167). DeYoung exposes sloppy use of sources in his Caesar comparison (162), but the main issue is that, once again, he leaves out the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection. DeYoung rightly argues that "Without the personal glory of Christ and His redeeming work front and center in the gospel, the kingdom of God often ends up sounding largely political" (189). Changing the world is a worthy cause, but it is a result of the gospel, not a substitute for it. And without the gospel, no one, no matter how blessed by Christians who serve, receives any good news.

In short, Bell's repainting of the Christian faith, though it contains some worthy truths, suffers from a tendency to elevate peripheral truths at the expense of core ones.

Having demoted the core Biblical doctrines to springs, he loses the uniqueness of Christ and the centrality of the gospel, and the result too much like a social gospel based on works. Only when the gospel is at the core can all these other truths fall into place.