

A Theological Critique of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*

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This article challenges ideas put forward by Rob Bell in “Velvet Elvis” where the ideas are not congruent with healthy theology or theological practice. Rob Bell deviates from traditional, conservative, mainstream Baptist theology in several areas. This article intends to prove that Rob Bell’s ideas lead the sheep God has called us to pastor into the error of the modern day “Emergent Church Movement.”

The intention is not to harshly impugn or to aggrandize to prove the thesis. Each point will be graciously made from Mr. Bell’s own statements giving him the benefit of the doubt when ambiguous material is presented. Many statements by Mr. Bell that others have commented on in a negative matter will not be presented. It would not be fair to assume the worst about every statement.

The book title, Velvet Elvis, comes from a painting found in Bell’s basement. Like the artist of this painting continues to “keep exploring, keep arranging, keep shaping and forming and bringing in new perspectives” of Elvis, the church must “keep going, exploring what it means to live in harmony with God and each other” according to Bell (Bell, 010). While we would agree that many churches have become stagnant and outdated in their methods, impairing their effectiveness for Christ, Bell’s proposals violate Jude’s instructions to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” (Jude 3, NASB).

To Bell’s credit, he does make the statement, “Times change. God doesn’t, but times do.” This indicates Bell is not an Open Theist or its similar modern day errors.

Bell does, however, call for radical change. “I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes 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” (Bell, 012). This could be dangerous. If theology has been accurately presented by the church historically, and Christian practice has been faithfully lived historically, then we should continue as we have before. We should not change authentic Christianity to make ourselves more comfortable or more acceptable to the world.

The first ominous sign is seen in footnote number one. Bell states “Marcus Borg explains this idea extremely well in his book...” (Bell, 180). Marcus Borg does not believe the Bible is the literal Word of God (<http://www.explorefaith.org/questions/literalWord.html>). Marcus Borg is part of the Jesus Seminar that cast off the gospels as creations of men and developed “The Gospel of Thomas” to present the “true” Jesus. Borg does not believe Jesus is the only way to God (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/39/story_3972_1.html). It is ominous that Bell would point to Borg as someone to explain a “central [assertion] of the Christian worldview (Bell, 019). Bell follows this with diminutive statements about Jesus.

Bell states “Jesus at one point claimed to be ‘the way, the truth, and the life’” (Bell, 021). He further states “Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions” (Bell, 021). Certainly He was. John 14.6 is surrounded by proclamations of calls of following Him and warnings of the coming persecution from those who oppose Him. Jesus was proclaiming the inadequacy of Judaism. Bell missed the perfect opportunity to exclaim the supremacy and exclusivity of Christ.

The Emergent Church Movement does the same. They allow other avenues to God rather than through Jesus Christ. [Although Bell has never claimed to be an adherent to the Emergent Church Movement, others observing his ministry have made the connection (Christianity Today, November 1, 2004).] Emergent leader, Brian McLaren, is convinced that salvation is not found outside the work of Jesus Christ. However, he will not concede that there is no salvation outside belief in Jesus Christ (see critiques of his book “Generous Orthodoxy” by evangelicals like D.A. Carson and Al Mohler).

The second ominous sign is seen in the discussion about bricks. The valid point is that various sects of Christianity build walls of minor doctrinal points that keep lost people from respecting their faith position. “You can’t be one of us because your hair is too long.” “You can’t be one of us because your skirt shows your sensual ankles for the entire world to see.” But to make light of major doctrines of the faith is disconcerting. Bell does this with the Trinity. He says that the Christian faith existed “thousands of years without it.... We can ... question it” (Bell, 022). He also does this with the virgin birth. He entertains the possibility that the virgin birth was a hoax. That virgin really doesn’t mean virgin (Bell, 026). He affirms both doctrines, but leaves the reader with the view that too much emphasis is placed on doctrine. How important is the doctrine of the virgin birth? Dr. Al Mohler explains,

Can a true Christian deny the virgin birth? The answer to that question must be a decisive No. Those who deny the virgin birth reject the authority of Scripture, deny the supernatural birth of the Savior, undermine the very foundations of the Gospel, and have no way of explaining the deity of Christ. (www.AlbertMohler.com, “Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth?”, December 25, 2006)

The Emergent Church Movement similarly seeks to deemphasize doctrine. According to the “Values and Practices” of Emergents, “We are committed to a “generous orthodoxy” in faith and practice – affirming the historic Christian faith and the biblical injunction to love one another even when we disagree.” (<http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, accessed May 24, 2007). Wikipedia states,

Proponents of the movement advocate an ecumenical, non-dogmatic view of doctrine in which they embrace a continual reexamination and flexible approach to theology which causes them to see faith as a journey rather than a destination, and to hold in tension even radical differences in doctrinal views, ethical mores, and moral nuances. This openness leads most emergents to extend an invitation to people of all religions and social backgrounds to contribute to the conversation. Emergents see theology as an "icon" pointing to God rather than as

a definition of God that has a 1 to 1 correspondence to "what is." By this they mean that they do not see any doctrinal expositions as definitive.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent_Church, accessed May 1, 2007)

D.A. Carson writes about the leaders of the Emergent movement, "Perhaps their rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove willing to reconsider the published judgments on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the Gospel itself." (quoted by Dr. Albert Mohler in http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-06-30, accessed May 15, 2007)

The third ominous sign is in yet another footnote. Bell writes about Robert Farrar Capon, "Go out and buy all his books and read them immediately" (Bell, 181). Robert Farrar Capon is an Episcopal priest and author. He is known for his view on salvation summarized in the following quote,

I am and I am not a universalist. I am one if you are talking about what God in Christ has done to save the world. The Lamb of God has not taken away the sins of some — of only the good, or the cooperative, or the select few who can manage to get their act together and die as perfect peaches. He has taken away the sins of the world — of every last being in it — . . . All human beings, at all times and places, are home free whether they know it or not, feel it or not, believe it or not.

But I am not a universalist if you are talking about what people may do about accepting that happy-go-lucky gift of God's grace. I take with utter seriousness everything that Jesus had to say about hell... But I will not — because Jesus did not — locate hell outside the realm of grace. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Farrar_Capon, accessed May 17, 2007)

He clarifies this view in saying,

Not all churches practice infant baptism, but infant baptism is a wonderful testament to absolute grace. It says, "It's done." It doesn't say, after this if you do something, *then* you'll be OK. It says, "You're OK *now*," not because you did something or thought something or figured something out, but you're OK now because Jesus says so. (www.christianodyssey.com/gospel/capon.htm, accessed May 17, 2007)

Capon does not see the need for conversion, repentance, or Lordship. The only need of the sinner is acceptance.

After talking about life change (identity, death of "old man", "new creation", perfection in Christ, confession) extensively (Bell, 139-144) in the seemingly orthodox sense of a new birth in Christ, Bell swerves from this orthodoxy. "So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody.... This reality then isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making" (Bell, 146). This seems eerily similar to Capon. Bell

makes no mention of the need for conversion, repentance, or Lordship. The only need of the sinner is acceptance. Jesus required much more.

This is the type of easy believism we see in the Emergent Church Movement. Quoting again the “Values and Practices” of Emergents, “We are committed to a “generous orthodoxy” in faith and practice – affirming the historic Christian faith and the biblical injunction to love one another even when we disagree.” They further state, “We practice “deep ecclesiology” – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others” (<http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, accessed May 24, 2007). In seeking to minister to a postmodern age, they have accepted the postmodern proclamation that truth for one person is not necessarily truth for all people nor can truth be known with certainty.

The final ominous sign is regarding end time events. . Bell writes “The goal isn’t escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to” (Bell, 150). Bell also writes, “The Bible paints a much larger view of salvation. It describes all of creation being restored. The author of Ephesians writes that all things will be brought together under Jesus.” Bell’s footnote quotes Ephesians 1:10. Bell continues, “Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker.... [W]e can join a movement that is as wide and deep and big as the universe itself. Rocks and trees and birds and swamps and ecosystems. God’s desire is to restore all of it” (Bell, 109). Most commentators agree that Ephesians 1:10 is an eschatological passage referring to the millennial kingdom when God’s purposes are fulfilled and all things both spiritual and material are under Christ’s control. No matter how hard we as believers try. No matter how many good deeds we do for the earth or its people. This passage will not come to pass until the Lord Jesus physically returns to earth to rule. Should Christians be involved in good deeds, even environmental good deeds? Absolutely, we should. Will these acts bring us to the fulfillment Ephesians 1:10? Only Jesus can fulfill this passage to the meaning of the Scripture.

Similarly, the Emergent Church adopts a restoration, dominion theology, or even a preterist approach to end times. This fact allows for the following observation, “The hope of the emerging church movement's "gospel" is to enhance the lives of others regardless of their lifestyles or beliefs. Therefore, social action, community involvement, and sacrificial hospitality are more emphasized in the movement than preaching and teaching.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent_Church, accessed June 27, 2007) The emphasis is clearly away from a future hope of the Kingdom to constructing a kingdom now through social action.

The Emergent Church Movement, when it moves off the scene as a whimsical fad, may have the redeeming value of shocking the typical, tradition-laden, selfish American Evangelical church into noticing its lack of impact on today’s people and culture. However, before its exit, it may do irreparable harm to churches and people. Mark Driscoll states,

I was part of what is now known as the Emerging Church Movement in its early days.... I had to distance myself, however, from one of many streams in the merging church because of theological differences. Since the late 1990s, this

stream has become known as Emergent. The emergent church is part of the Emerging Church Movement but does not embrace the dominant ideology of the movement. Rather, the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity" (*Confessions of a Reformation*, p. 21)

Rob Bell, wittingly or unwittingly, is being used to draw believers into this new liberalism.

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