

Velvet Elvis Revisited
9/27/07

I feel that I need to make a few general observations prior to dealing with specifics.

First, some positive things:

Bell and the emergent church are seeking to reach the postmodernist and that is a good.

He does state his belief in doctrines like the Trinity and virgin birth.

He is trying to communicate the gospel in an understandable way to his culture.

His book has some truth in it.

He is a gifted writer.

He seems to be very sincere about following Christ.

Second, Bell is part of a larger group generally known as “the emergent church” or “emerging church”, which Ed Stetzer, a missiologist with the Southern Baptist convention, helpfully divides into three groups that he calls the relevants, the reconstructionists and the revisionists. This distinction is helpful so that we do not unwarrantedly lump everyone into the same camp.¹

It is with the latter two groups that most of the serious concerns arise, and concerns are most pronounced in the last group. Usually, when you hear someone referring to the dangers in the “emergent church movement” it is one of these last two groups to which the speaker is referring. Whether one officially belongs is not the issue; the problem is whether their view of biblical teachings along with their analysis of society, Christianity, modernism, and postmodernism are seen through a postmodern prism. Bell’s teaching places him within the last two groups, which I will seek to demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

A counterfeit is not the real thing because it lacks certain qualities. However, the problem is that often times only the “trained eye” can detect the subtle nuances which confirm the counterfeit. I am totally unable to detect a counterfeit twenty, but my banker can by a mere touch or glimpse. Unfortunately that is also true with some false or misleading teachings. They contain truth, look very real to almost everyone, but in reality they are not genuine. Many of the things that Bell writes about and says have truth in them, and at times contain very commendable ideas, but the underlying inadequacies and asserted conclusions are spiritually dangerous. Consequently, I will note what may seem like minor discrepancies but in reality they are essentials that confirm his teaching is seriously flawed, misleading or false.

Because I am seeking to be specific, I am going to focus on only five areas, and I must excerpt things that he said, which I hope are representative of the core of his argument, and if not I will gladly apologize. But just because I must excerpt, does not mean that I will be taking his thoughts out of context.

¹ <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>

Also, I am not going after Bell, nor is anyone else, but rather he came with his “new view of Christianity” thereby indicating that those who disagreed were wrong—as his example of Luther clearly indicates. I am just trying to examine what he says in light of Scripture, and everything that I say must be tested in the same manner.

Fourth, my concerns are not merely concerns of Baptists, Methodists, or any denomination, but actually the concerns of a host of pastors and theologians who believe in the full inerrancy of the Scripture. These writers, speakers, professors, and pastors transcend denomination, culture, and time. This does not, in and of itself, make the concerns true, but it does demonstrate that the concerns are shared across a broad spectrum of serious students of Scripture and history.

The things that I am going to address specifically:

First, I am going to limit my first four concerns to issues that are known as “essentials” of the Christian faith rather than non-essentials and the last one will be his handling of a particular situation that I am personally familiar with, which I think will demonstrate his lack of concern for details and context, a problem throughout his book. Within Christianity we have healthy disagreements concerning things that the Bible leaves open for debate, or which, although very important, are not essential for salvation or the perpetuation of the Christian faith and essential biblical fidelity, and that is fine.

The reason we have different denominations is because we disagree on non-essentials (remember non-essential does not mean non-important), e.g. Methodists, Baptists, Bible Churches, etc. This might include things like how often to have the Lord’s Supper, worship styles, or the structure of the local church governance. Conversely, the difference between a cult and a Christian church or denomination is that the cult teaches things that are contrary to the essential truths of Christianity, e.g. the nature of God, the full deity and humanity of Christ, the trustworthiness of Scripture, or salvation by faith in Christ alone.

Some of these same irreconcilable differences exist between those that believe the Bible and those that do not, known by such titles as “liberals” or “classic liberals” since they deny the non-negotiables—essentials—of Scripture, and some who even deny everything in the Bible except some of the moral teachings. I am not saying that Bell leads a cult; my purpose is to point out that the concerns that I will address deal with things of the utmost importance, essentials, as opposed to merely different styles of worship, communication, etc., i.e. non-essentials.

Second, as I look at his statements in these essential areas, I will highlight rhetorical tactics that he uses, which on a surface level are quite persuasive—which is why people use them; however, they are actually logical fallacies that have no validity at all in demonstrating the truthfulness of one’s arguments or the untruthfulness of another’s arguments. Some people, maybe Bell is one of these, use them without even knowing they are in fact meaningless. I do not know his motive, so I assume the best, but I do know that these tactics are invalid.

Some of these fallacies are “the straw man”, “either or”, or “false analogies”, and he also uses metaphors—some very weak—which are either misleading or pressed too far. Metaphors, similes, etc, can illustrate a truth, but they cannot produce a truth, make a falsehood true, or make a truth more true even though they are used to do so at times; also, he picks certain Scriptures to make his point—which is what he accuses others of doing—while ignoring other Scriptures from the very same context that clearly demonstrate his “illustration” or “suggestion” to be inadequate. An example of this is his hypothesis that the virgin birth may one day be shown not to be true—even though he believes it is true. I will go into greater detail concerning this later.

Another example of what I see in his writings is that he seeks to retell the truth of Scripture in a new, more creative and engaging way—which he is very good at—but in doing so he recasts the truths, position of Scripture or others in such a way that make his conclusion seems inevitable. However, the problem is that the way the teaching or position was recast actually obfuscates or distorts—either by omitting crucial elements, adding inappropriate ideas, or making faulty comparisons—the simple truths in the actual teaching.

Technically, this is a form of the straw man fallacy. He recasts the story, changing the essential nature of the issue or the other side’s position, which creates a position not actually held by the one he is arguing against, i.e. a straw man. I will look at this further, but his use of the “spring” and “brick wall” metaphors does this. He casts the spring as accepting and the brick wall—doctrine is very important—as the place where one may have to agree on everything to be counted as “in”, e.g. not very accepting. Of course, the slightest glance at Christianity, my church Trinity—where doctrine is very important—or countless other Christian gatherings, demonstrate the falsity of such analogy even though there are some extreme cases where his analogy is accurate. However, he does not seem to be using his analogy to point out extremes, and if he is, then it serves no purpose in his argument.

When handling anything, but particularly the Word of God, one must be extraordinarily careful not to reconceptualize things about God, Scripture, and truth in such a way that the actual truth is undermined, unclear, or marginalized, or the “sure” truth is morphed into an “unsure” truth. Although he affirms his belief in the Trinity, he does so in a way that leaves it unclear whether it really matters, or if it is something that is objectively true and therefore true for everyone, or if it is something others “*should*” believe.

Third, his use of ideas, metaphors, illustrations and arguments that have some truth in them are overstated in order to make his point, which results in morphing a statement that is true to a degree, into an untruth, which in turn undermines his position. For example, he is very big on questioning everything and says that Christianity is all about questions. He says of questions and questioners, “Questions, no matter how shocking or blasphemous or arrogant or ignorant or raw, are rooted in humility.” (p030)

Of course this is simply not true. First, Christianity does involve questions, and that is a part of the growing process, but questioning is not necessarily a sign of humility, and the Scripture never says that it is, nor does it say “questions bring freedom.” Rather it says “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Second, while questions may be acts of humility, they may also arise from pride. Skeptics are full of questions, but many are unwilling to receive any answer that is not what they are looking for. Another example of questions from pride is when someone has to have all the facts or answers before submitting to God or His Word. “God I will not serve you until you answer...,” meaning answer to his satisfaction, which is tantamount to making him God. The Pharisees questioned Jesus healing on the Sabbath, His views on marriage, who He was... but their questions were surely not born out of humility or else many statements by Jesus were simply uncalled for at best (Matthew 23:13-36).

I mention this merely to point out that some things he says have truth in them, but then, in order to make his point seem undeniable, he so overstates the truth so that it actually becomes untrue—again I am not questioning his motive, but rather his statements.

Questions rooted in humility are evident because they seek answers from God in order to submit to them. They do not ask God questions in order for Him to defend Himself, or so that one may be excused from following the obvious teachings of Scripture, but so that a wretched sinner may know and worship and serve Him better. His use of many questions about Mary being a virgin makes my point not his. (031)

While I am appreciative of his clearly stated beliefs in things like the virgin birth and the Trinity, it is the lack of clarity concerning their importance, surety, and whether he believes these are essential for others to believe rather than just part of his story, that is my concern. In other words, if the Scripture makes it essential to be walking in “the way” and he does not, that is a serious deficiency in the communication of the truth to those who desperately need the full truth and the gospel—Scripture—rightly represented.

Postmodernism is sort of a “buzz” word, but it is a word that actually characterizes some of our present cultural milieu. While postmodernism has some admirable characteristics—openness to the spiritual world, rejection of scientism, etc—there are also some very dangerous ideas, particularly in regard to questions about objective truth and our ability to know it if it does exist. In trying to reach the postmodern, in many ways, Bell has imbibed at the cistern of postmodernism too long and has thereby become so postmodern in his thinking and presentation that he actually undermines the message his hearers so desperately need to hear.

Some of the postmodern characteristics that are antithetical to Christian Scripture that I see in his book are: no clear objectively true meta-narrative; emphasis on communal truth; there are different stories - one may believe their story, but no one story is true for everyone or can be known to be true; the propositional nature of scriptural truths is seriously minimized or completely undermined. Questioning, change, and uncertainty are far more prominent than truth, the knowableness of objective truth, and the clear commands of Scripture to not only live Christianity but to know Scripture.

Christians that write from the postmodern, emergent perspective pose much of what they disagree with as modernity, and then seek to destroy modernity; and thereby destroy the knowableness or certainty of some historic doctrines of Christianity. The problem with that approach is that systematic thinking about doctrine or certitude about truth existed long before the modern era; further, those that held to them did not get swept up into the real nets of modernity, which posits such ideas as man can solve his problems through science, reason trumps Scripture, and everything is relative. Moreover, they fail to sufficiently note that there are problems inherent in postmodernism, which they so heartily embrace, and while they are certain we cannot be certain, they seem quite certain they are right.

Recommended reading

Books and articles for further reading:

“Truth War” by John MacArthur

“Truth & The New Kind of Christian” by R. Scott Smith

“Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church” by D.A. Carson

Other articles that touch on this issue

<http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>

<http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598016%7CCIID2249688,00.html>

<http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598016%7CCIID2249226,00.html>

Now I would like to touch on five areas of specific concern even though there are others worth mentioning if time permitted.

First, he undermines the knowableness of objective truth

In pages 047-058, he discusses the issue of interpretation. He uses the “binding and loosing” passages and practices of the Rabbis, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and the repeated assertion that everything is an interpretation; further he seeks to show that those who claim to just speak the truth of Scripture, or follow the Scripture, are really naïve. (053-054)

He says, “It sounds nice to say, I'm not giving you my opinion; I'm just telling you what it (the Bible) means.’ The problem is, it is not true. I'm actually giving you my opinion, my *interpretation* of what it says. And the more I insist that I am giving you the objective truth of what it really says, the less objective I am actually being.” (054)

He writes, "Our words aren't absolutes. Only God is absolute, and God has no intention of sharing this absoluteness with anything, especially words people have come up with to talk about him." (023, also read 022-028)

When he is through, one wonders if anyone can know for sure what anything in the Bible says and means by what it says in an objective way and thereby incumbent upon all to believe; or is everything subject to personal interpretation, only valid for that community, and only true for them, which is profoundly postmodern. In other words, he leaves you with all of the reasons why you cannot be certain of the knowability of the truth of Scripture, but nothing to guide you or confirm that you can know its truth and or even if it is true beyond a personal belief.

Here again he weaves so many things together, quite apart from their context, in order to demonstrate that truth is communal. Addressing all of them would take far more response than time permits, so let me try to touch on a couple of things.

For example, look at the passages on binding and loosing (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). He makes this look like the granting of authority for the community of believers, any community, to get together and determine what they interpret Scripture to mean. First, he failed to mention that he did not quote a version which actually translates “bind” as it is in the Greek, which is a perfect passive participle, meaning “shall have been bound” and the same is true with the phrase “shall have been loosed” in both passages.

Consequently, these passages are not about God authorizing the apostles (Matthew 16:19) or the church (Matthew 18:18) to decide what they think best but rather that the apostles, and ultimately all followers of Christ, have the authority to declare what God has permitted or forbidden on the earth. The latter passage deals with church discipline, and therefore gives the local church the authority, as prescribed in Scripture, to discipline its members; it has nothing to do with people being able to bind things or loose them, but rather God has already loosed and bound some things and when we declare and act upon them, it is with the authority of God.

He uses Acts 15 to demonstrate that “Jesus expects his followers to be engaged in the endless process of deciding what it means to actually live the Scriptures”. (050) He further says of this verse, “These first Christians find themselves having to make a huge decision about what it means to be a Christian.” (050) Of course then he applies their “mak[ing] decisions about what it means to be a Christian” (051) to us doing that today.

He further says, “they don't claim to have an absolute word from God on the matter.” (057) The implication is clear, we should never—or if never then almost never—claim to have absolute truth from the teaching of the Word of God. Casey Freswick notes, “Therefore, we should never claim to have absolute truth on or from the teaching of the Word of God. First, assuming there are some matters where we cannot claim absolute truth does not mean that we cannot claim absolute truth on any matter. Second, one wonders why Rob Bell even bothers to cite a Biblical example if the Bible is all just a personal interpretation. But to say you are doctrinally WRONG is wrong except if it is Rob Bell condemning bricks for thinking they are right. He claims to know the truth about truth, but Rob Bell is wrong on the truth about truth. He is outside the orthodox Christian faith about truth. Thus, when he says he agrees with Christian truth, he means something vastly different from Protestants or Catholics or Presbyterians or Baptists. We

have historically disagreed with one another but one thing we agree on is that there is truth.”²

It is true that sometimes people do put God in a box, but to speak of God using the biblical terms He freely revealed is not putting God in a box even though when we argue for biblical fidelity it may appear to be that since others are arguing that you can't put God in a box. We are not saying that what the Bible says about God is all there is to know about Him—put Him in our finite knowledge box—but rather that what the Bible says about God is true and nothing known or ever known about God will ever contradict His self-revelation of Himself; moreover, those who seek to undermine or ignore the biblical declarations about God are actually the ones who seek to put Him in their box. This was Jesus' problem with the Pharisees.

Bell states, "An answer... raises even deeper questions.... Truth always leads to more...truth. Because truth is insight into God and God is infinite and God has no boundaries or edges. So truth always has layers and depth and texture. It's like a pool that you dive into...no matter how hard and fast you swim downward, the pool keeps getting...deeper. The bottom will always be out of reach." (033) Then he adds, "The goal is not to be a 'New Testament church'. That makes the New Testament church the authority. The authority is God who is acting in and through those people at that time and now these people at this time. The point is to ask, what is God up to here, now?" (065)

While Bell makes sure the reader knows he can never know God fully because He is infinite—with which I agree—he also sadly leaves the reader with an equal lack of assurance whether he may understand God at all beyond some subjective or communal understanding; further, while I agree that truth grants opportunity to garner more truth, one must also know that what he has already learned is indeed truth. If he is unsure about that, he could be following a lie and thereby only find himself further and further away from truth, which is pharisaical indeed (John 8:44).

Also, his statement that the goal is not to make the church “the authority” is true, but it is misleading as well since a key belief of Protestantism is “sola scripture”; thus, God is the authority who has conveyed His will through His authoritative word.³ While Bell is right that the church is not the authority, he is wrong in thinking that it is God acting in and through different people at different times, and that the way to know that is to “ask, what is God up to here, now?” That understanding again reemphasizes Bell's misguided understanding of truth, and his subtle devaluing of Scripture. Although we may witness the mighty works of God in our personal lives and movements—reformation, revivals, etc.—the authority for everything and anything that God has spoken to in His Word is His Word.

² Postmodern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith (I) A Christian Critique of Rob Bell's Velvet Elvis, Rev. Casey Freswick,
http://www.reformedfellowship.net/articles/freswick_casey_jan06_v56_n01.htm

³ Catholics do make the church an authority alongside of Scripture.

While it may appear that those questioning his orthodoxy are being pharisaical, the opposite is actually true. Remember the Pharisees set up a system that excluded the clear teaching of Scripture and Jesus was challenging that unbiblical system. For Christ, truth was the issue, for the Pharisees it simply was not. Also, Bell relates this “repainting” that he is doing with Luther in the reformation. (011)

Of course Luther was not reforming according to Luther but according to the clear, knowable⁴ truths of Scripture. He said to the pope, “Unless I am convinced by reason and Scripture I will not recant...here I stand I can do no other. God help me.” The comparison of Bell to Luther fails because it is Bell’s belief in the lack of clarity, certainty of and ability to know truth that is the question. Luther was saying it can be known and the church should follow it.

The truth of Scripture is that humility is demonstrated by bowing to the Scripture, and truth is knowable, (John 17:7); God the Father is truth (John 7:28), God the Son is truth (Rev. 3:7) the Holy Spirit is truth (1 John 5:6), for worship to be acceptable to God, it must be in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24), the church is “the pillar and support of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), Christians speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15), we are to love in truth (1 John 3:18), and walk in truth (3 John 4).

His examples of truth on pages 032-033 leading to greater study and knowing God more fully is good, and Christians have and are doing that in order to follow Christ more faithfully (John 17:7), but the fact that there is deeper knowledge and our knowledge is not exhaustive does not mean that it is not certain; and if it does mean that, then more learning about something that is always a mystery is futile.

Second, his metaphors and statements undermine the clarity and importance of biblical doctrines—teachings

Bell states, “The tradition then is painting, not making copies of the same painting over and over.” (013) Of course truth is not art, and while truth may be further understood or restated, it is also to be believed, lived and communicated.

He notes, “The challenge of the art is to take what was great about the previous paintings and incorporate that into new paintings.” (013) Of course Christians are not seeking to keep what was great—enjoyable, beautiful, worked, etc.—but what was and is true. Again, the painting metaphor allows for far more liberty than is warranted by the reality of biblical truth. Truth can very easily be misunderstood, misrepresented or turned into a lie with eternal consequences.

What if the theology of yesterday is correct, they did get it right, and it does not need to be painted again? If so, then he is not right, and it is just another postmodern construct. If it just makes me feel better, then it really is all about me; simply put, art and truth are not the same, and great and truth are not synonyms.

⁴ Protestants believe in the perspicuity of Scripture, which means that it is clear, understandable and knowable.

He makes it clear that he is not just referring to methods and language but “beliefs”. He says “it works for them and meets their needs.” (014) Granted, there are differences in opinion about certain styles of worship—drums or organs—and that is fine since the Bible says nothing about that. However, what is maintained and non-negotiable is not determined based on what “works” but rather what is true. For example, while it may seem great to want the freedom to say you can worship in any old way, Jesus laid down the absolutes for worship, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

Also, the Bible says a lot about worship, but most are unaware that half of everything the Bible says about worship are prohibitions concerning false worship. And these prohibitions are not only in regard to worshipping the wrong God, but also condemning worshipping the right God in the wrong way.⁵

Bell seeks to reclassify biblical doctrines like the Trinity and the virgin birth, using inadequate metaphors like springs (021-025), thereby making them non-essentials. While the church recognizes some things are essentials and some are non-essentials, the Trinity and virgin birth clearly fall under the category of essential. Some Straw Man questions are listed on page 029. None of the ones mentioned are really doctrinal and people have been and will continue to ask those questions; however, the answers are always to be sought in the Scripture first. Further, while some things are to be questioned, some things are to be learned and followed rather than continually questioning them (1 John 2:4). The truth of the Christian quest is to study and know truth not repaint it to fit us.

Bell says, “Our real needs in life are not for more information but for loving community with other people on the journey.” (030) This is another Either Or fallacy. It is not either or but both, and people apparently do need more information or he would not have written the book; moreover, if one knows the answer, or more of the answer, and does not share it with others, can that be defined as love? Jesus said “the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). The New Testament is about sharing information, and teaching those whom we share it with to obey and follow the Scripture (Matthew 28:18-20). That is the Great Commission - to go into all the world and “*teach them to observe all that I have commanded.*” It doesn’t suggest that we tell them a story but tell them the truth that God revealed, which necessitates its knowableness.

Although Bell affirms his belief in the Trinity and the virgin birth, he does not make it clear that he believes that these truths are objective knowable truths of Scripture. He posits the idea that what if they were proven untrue⁶, “can you still love God?” (026) Well the answer is, some things are so foundational and therefore essential, like the virgin birth, if they are proven untrue, you can love your vision of God but not the God

⁵ Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry, John MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), p234-242

⁶ I am not accepting even the assumption that the virgin birth can be proven untrue. The virgin birth is inextricably tied to Christ being God incarnate, fully God and fully man; thus, the loss of the virgin birth is the loss of the person whom Christ is presented as and claims to be; consequently, the loss of the virgin birth is the loss of Christianity.

presented in the Scripture. Jesus said, if you love me you will keep my commandments (John 14:15); although Bell posits these truths as springs, they are in fact bricks and not just any old bricks.

He leads you down the primrose path by pointing out something we all agree on, like some things we don't know for sure; and then he expands the idea that we don't know some things for sure, infallibly leading us to the idea that we can't know anything with absolute certainty. And as mentioned earlier, because one cannot know some things, or know them with certainty, does not logically lead to the idea that nothing can be known or known with certainty. Concerning his spring analogy, I would ask, what springs, if any, are essential? What about the spring about God's person, will (he specifically said 'The springs aren't God' 022), truth, salvation, sin, etc.? (022-028) Bricks are not God, but without them, how would anyone know about God, know God, or know if one's rendition of "God" was God or Beelzebub?

His metaphors seem to undermine Christianity since they leave us with knowing and celebrating what we cannot know—paradoxes, mysteries—rather than worshipping the God of Scripture that we can know and declare to the world with certainty.

Third, his manner of speaking about God is at best irreverent and inaccurate and at worst a path to heresy.

Bell emphasizes how Christianity is a series of paradoxes and mysteries and says concerning paradoxes, "we cannot resolve paradoxes." (033-034) Consequently, once again, he leaves readers not with the certainties of Christianity, Scripture, and faith but rather with an ever growing list of uncertainties. Therefore, Christianity for Bell is an unresolvable paradox. That conclusion seems inescapable because if Christianity "is" a paradox or a compilation of paradoxes and paradoxes are something we "cannot resolve" then Christianity must be just one big unresolvable and/or unknowable "mystery". This leaves Christians with nothing more than opinions, and certainty about anything the Scripture teaches is unknowable at least in this life.

He uses the Trinity to illustrate this by saying, "the more you study the Trinity and what has been said...the more you are left in wonder and awe about the nature of God". While learning more about God surely potentiates more worship and awe, the question he leaves hanging is, does it lead to more certain knowledge about God? By his description, we are once again left with mystery but no certainty. It is true that we do not know *all* there is about God—He is infinite—but the question is can we know for certain *anything* about God that is objective and for everyone?

Contrary to Bell's endless string of unresolvable paradoxes being the genesis of worship, it is actually an increase in the knowledge of God and man's hopeless plight without His grace that increases awe, wonder, and adoration. Merely saying it is a mystery potentiates creating an image of God in our own likeness, which is actually adoration of self rather than God. The Scripture was given to us in order to reveal God to us so that we may know, follow, worship, serve and proclaim Him to the world. That is why

Scripture is called the “revelation” of God—it reveals Him. Bell simply offers no motivation for the serious study of the Trinity because there is no hint that serious study will lead to better understanding or that better understanding of God has any purpose or benefit.

He further deemphasizes the essentialness of the doctrine of the Trinity by noting that “it is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it.” (022) While he rightly notes that, this does not make it any less true,⁷ that simple recognition does not actually answer the question that the reality of the Trinity begs for. Of course it is quite obvious that knowing or not knowing about something does not determine whether it is true or not; for example, it was always true that certain kinds of fuel would enable the combustion engine to propel something with people in it, but it was not always known; consequently, the question is whether or not the now known truth of God being a Trinity is essential to the reality, claims, message and truth of Christianity. The answer is absolutely. Christianity is the only faith that acknowledges the Trinity, without which there is no Christianity, for then Christ is not who He said He was (John 8:58), and the Scripture is full of lies.

Further, his argument that we jumped without it for thousands of years apparently means it does not have to be objectively taught and believed in order to be faithful to God. If by “thousands of years” he means in the New Testament era, he is simply wrong. Tertullian (c160-c230) used the term “Trinity” in order to describe the expression of the nature of God in the Scripture. That the Scripture taught that God was triune was known earlier, but not understood as well; consequently, while the term “Trinity” is not in the Scripture, the truth of that term is most definitely taught and proclaimed in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament, just like the word atonement is not found in the New Testament, but the truth that Jesus atoned for our sins most definitely is.

If by “thousands” he means the Old Testament time, then by that logic he must also mean that we do not need the name Jesus since we “jumped” without having to believe in that specific name for thousands of years. If that is his point, he misses the significance of progressive revelation. Man is not accountable to believe what God has not revealed, e.g. Noah, Abraham...did not have to believe in the person who died on the cross named Jesus, but they must now (John 17:3; Acts 4:10-12, 17). One could add, since we “jumped” without Paul’s teaching, Peter’s teaching, Pentecost...they must all be extraneous to the thrill of “jumping”. Well they may all be non-essentials in the world of trampolines, but in the faithful following and honoring our Lord Jesus they are undeniably not, and to suggest otherwise is serious beyond measure, even to the damning of the souls of men and women. (John 14:6, 14:15, John 17:7).

In Bell’s trampoline analogy, he makes the doctrine of the “Trinity” a dispensable spring (022) and thereby deals with the most serious topic one could consider, God, in a loose and frivolous way. For example, he says concerning God being everywhere—known as His omnipresence—“people began to call this presence...‘Spirit’.” (022) Jesus’ coming has “people saying things like God has visited us in the flesh”. (022) Now, what is

⁷ See Bell’s footnote 5, p180

implied by this explanation of the Trinity is that it was thought up, or discovered by people, in order to explain their experiences or observations.

However, that is categorically wrong. No person ever surmised, reasoned to, thought of, or conceptualized the nature of God as Trinity apart from God’s self-disclosure of Himself through His word, the Scripture. Christianity is the only faith in the world that has ever held to this belief, and Christians do so because God revealed this truth about Himself. The reason we believe what we believe about God the Father is that He revealed that He is holy, all powerful, everywhere, love, and sovereign. We believe that Jesus is God in the flesh because it is declared in the Scripture (John 1:1) and it was declared by Jesus (John 8:58). We believe that the Holy Spirit is God because it is declared by the Scripture (John 14:6). The word translated ‘another’ in that verse refers to another of the same kind, i.e. Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God; also in passages like Acts 5:3-4, Peter asked Ananias why he lied to the Holy Spirit and then says he lied to God. Further we believe in the Trinity because the Scripture declares that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have the same attributes, and accomplish the same works that are exclusive of the God of Scripture.⁸

A reliable definition of what is meant by “Trinity” is One God who manifests Himself in three persons who are co-equal, co-eternal and same substance. We know about that truth, which the term Trinity embodies because it is declared by God in His word.

Fourth, he beclouds the clarity, nature and exclusivity of the gospel

He juxtaposes the humble questioner with the one that has “it all figured out.” (031) Though there are some people like this, no true Christian in his right mind would say he has it all figured out. Further, while it is true that questions *can be* an indicator of humility, it is actually pride rather than humility to continue questioning or doubting what Scripture makes lucidly certain, e.g. salvation through Christ alone.

⁸ They have the same attributes, which are attributes of deity

Omnipotence	I Peter 1:5	Phil 3:21	Rom 15:19
Omniscience	Jer. 17:10	John 2:24-25	I Cor. 2:11
Omnipresence	Jer. 23:24	Matt. 18:20	Ps. 139:7
Immutability	Mal. 3:6	Heb. 13:8	Heb 9:14
Eternality	Ps. 90:2	Rev 1:17, Mic. 5:2	Heb. 9:14
Holiness	Ps. 139:7	Rev. 15:4	Acts 3:14

Works of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same

	<u>Father</u>	<u>Christ</u>	<u>Holy Spirit</u>
Creation	Gen. 1:1	Col. 1:16	Gen. 1:2
Create Man	Gen. 2:7	Col. 1:16	Job 33:4
Jesus Death	Rom. 8:32	John 10:18	Heb. 9:14
Jesus Resurrection	Acts 2:24	John 2:19	I Peter 3:18
Man’s Resurrection	John 5:21	John 5:21	Rom. 8:11
Inspiration	II Tim. 3:16	I Peter 1:10-11	II Peter 1:21
Indwelling	Eph. 4:6	Col. 1:27	I Cor. 6:19
Sanctification	Jude 1:1	Heb 2:9-11	I Cor. 6:11
Security	John 10:29	John 10:28	Eph 4:30

He says, “You don’t have to know anything about the springs to pursue living ‘the way’.” (034) He makes clear that springs are doctrines. (022) I do not want to be harsh, but there simply is no other way to view this kind of statement other than as very nonsensical. For according to Bell, you don’t have to know any of the teaching about God, Christ, or ‘the way’ to pursue living ‘the way’. Of course this leads to asking what way he is talking about if not the way revealed in Scripture. In other words, one cannot have the way—Jesus, holiness, God, etc.—without the doctrines revealed in Scripture, which tell us the truth about the way. Jesus stated very emphatically, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). It is His word which leads us to and on “the way,” and without it we end up on the broad way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14).

In his comparison of his way “trampoline” with “brickworld” we see the straw man again. He says, “In brickworld, the focus often becomes getting people to believe the right things so they can be in”. (034) Bricks refer to core doctrines. Bell (026-027) illustrates this in his metaphor of a person who holds certain truths to be non-negotiable. He then moves from a particular man’s understanding of Genesis 1 and the rest of Scripture, to posing the possibility that if there are serious questions about the virgin birth spring “Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian?” (026-027) His question is couched in such a way that it begs for a yes response. In other words, if you lose a spring or two, you can still jump on the trampoline.

While there are non-essentials⁹ in the Scripture, the virgin birth is simply not one of them. The only people who may deny the virgin birth are those who do not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and/or Christ as Savior who is fully God and fully man.

In the Old Testament, we find a promise given to King Ahaz, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Now, it is true that the word translated “virgin” *alma* can also mean “young maiden” or a “girl of marriageable age”; however, a couple of things signify at least a very extraordinary birth; first, it was to serve as a sign, which a normal birth would not do; second, the name of the child means “God with us”, which seems to be part of the sign and is clearly not a product of a normal birth; third, the word *alma* is used in the Old Testament of women that we know were virgins (Genesis 24:16; Leviticus 21:1-3; Judges 21:12); consequently, it is undeniable that it does often carry the idea of being a virgin, which seems to fit the context better and there is no contextual or biblical reason for not understanding it thusly; fourth, this particular word may have been used to be more specific, e.g. a young woman who is a virgin; lastly, if the testimony of the New Testament is that Mary was a virgin, and it refers to Isaiah’s prophecy thusly, it means that it is not only true; but that it was God’s ultimate purpose in giving the prophecy.¹⁰

⁹ Only in the sense of not being essential to the gospel or perpetuation of the Christian faith. This in no way implies that they are not important or beneficial.

¹⁰ See also the first promise related to the birth of the Savior (Genesis 3:15), which refers to the woman’s seed, when technically the seed belongs to man.

In the New Testament we find Luke 1:34 saying “virgin”, which is translated from the word *ginosko*. In Scripture *ginosko* is used at times as a euphemism for sexual relations (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25, 19:8; Judges 11:39, 21:12; 1 Sam 1:19; Matt 1:25). By reading verses 31-33, it is clear that this is Mary’s response to the Holy Spirit saying she would conceive and bear a child. She queried, “How can this be since I know not a man?” Clearly she knew some men, but she had not had sexual relations; moreover, Mary understood how conception happened, and that conception, humanly speaking was impossible for her since she was a virgin. The answer to her question in verse 35 is that the Holy Spirit would “overshadow” her. In other words, the normal answer would have been “you will have intercourse with a man”, but this conception was not to be normal, it was to be supernatural. Mary would, by the power of the Holy Spirit, conceive a child and still be a virgin since man was unnecessary to the process. So Luke is quite clear; Mary was a virgin when Christ was conceived and gave birth (Matt 1:25).

Matthew says, “before they came together” *sunelthei*, (Matthew 1:18), which again is a euphemism for intercourse. This is made more evident because the verse goes on to say, “she was found to be with child *by the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 1:18, italics added). Found to be with child not from man—Joseph—but the Holy Spirit. Verse 25, says Joseph “kept her a virgin until....” here virgin is translated from the words “not know”, a literal translation is “he knew her not”; of course he knew who she was, and so it once again is clearly saying that they did not have sexual relations.

Verse 23 is a quote of Isaiah 7:14, and verse 22 tells what it means, “Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US”” (Matthew 1:22-23). Consequently, Isaiah’s prophecy found its ultimate fulfillment in the virgin birth of Christ the Messiah.

Verse 16 says concerning the birth of Jesus, “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16). The word “whom” which tells by whom Jesus was born, is feminine singular, and once again clearly and unambiguously proclaims the virgin birth. Jesus was fully God (John 1:1) and fully man (John 1:14). He did not need a natural conception since he existed as God forever, but in order to become fully man, he was born of a woman conceived by the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth is called the “incarnation” because Christ did not begin His life at conception as does everyone else, but rather He was God incarnated in the womb of woman and became a man. Further, it seems pretty clear that the virgin birth protected Christ, as a man, from being infected by the curse of sin that everyone else is born with through the natural birth process. Even more clear is that Christ could not have been the Savior, paying for the sins of man, unless He is perfect man and perfect God, which necessitates the virgin birth.¹¹

¹¹ “The Christian notion of a virginal conception was no more plausible in first-century Judaism than it is in the twentieth-century Western world, yet it has formed an integral part of Christian belief for two thousand years. Though Matthew expounds nothing of its significance here, the virginal conception has regularly been understood as a way by which Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine. His father,

This leaves me with two questions. First, the primary question concerning Bell is not whether he believes in the virgin birth, but rather can a Christian read what the Scripture says concerning the virgin birth and deny the truth and/or the certain knowableness of the importance and essentialness of the virgin birth?

Second, is this a spring that the trampoline can do without? Well according to Bell, yes. However, according to Scripture, it can only be dispensed with if the truthfulness of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the sinlessness of Christ, and therefore the entire gospel, are non-essentials. Bell's playful handling of such important Christian and Scriptural teachings in order to make a point are simply unacceptable. Is there no fear of God, humility, and reverence for the word of God?

Now a word needs to be said about Bell's unwarranted contentment with the adequacy of the trampoline metaphor to present the reality of Christianity. For example, trampolines are actually incredibly dangerous. In one year alone, there were 95,000 injuries associated with trampolines,¹² even with strict guidelines restricting their use. However, as alarming as the danger of trampolines is, I suggest that his extensive and particular use of the trampoline as a metaphor for Christianity is far more perilous because Christianity is more than jumping. It is about knowing, following, serving, sacrificing, holiness, proclaiming, and yes defending (1 Peter 3:15).

He makes the trampoline important and the springs—doctrines—dispensable. However, with real trampolines, springs are absolutely essential because if some springs are missing or broken, the potential danger of jumping on a trampoline is multiplied so that most loving parents would not let their children on it to jump; further, if enough springs are missing harm is inevitable; moreover, if too many springs are missing then one no longer has a trampoline, but merely a piece of material lying on the ground, virtually indistinguishable from or at least no more valuable than other discards on the ground. Removing some of the doctrines that Bell seems to believe but thinks are dispensable, reduces Christianity to nothing more than another option added to the ever-growing host of available religions in the pantheon of syncretism.

Again, on page 027, he introduces the either/or fallacy by reasoning that you don't pull a picture out and argue about this particular loved one, but rather you just show the picture and give them an opportunity to see what they see. That sounds good, but what if they

in essence, was God, through the work of the Holy Spirit; his mother was the fully human woman, Mary. As fully God, Jesus was able to pay the eternal penalty for our sins (v. 21) for which finite humanity could not atone. As fully human he could be our adequate representative and substitutionary sacrifice." Craig Blomberg, vol. 22, *Matthew*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary, 58 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1992).

MacArthur says, "But Mary's virginity protected a great deal more than her own moral character, reputation, and the legitimacy of Jesus' birth. It protected the nature of the divine Son of God. The child is never called the son of Joseph; Joseph is never called Jesus' father, and Joseph is not mentioned in Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55). Had Jesus been conceived by the act of a man, whether Joseph or anyone else, He could not have been divine and could not have been the Savior. His own claims about Himself would have been lies, and His resurrection and ascension would have been hoaxes. And mankind would forever remain lost and damned." John MacArthur, *Matthew*, 16 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989).

¹² <http://www.spineuniverse.com/displayarticle.php/article843.html>

saw his wife as a prostitute, someone they could have their way with, would he defend her? The truth is we show, we live, we share, and at times, we defend the claims of Christ and the Scripture; all of the apostles as well as Jesus did this, and we are commanded to correct error, not merely ignore it.

He says, “The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can’t be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not.” (032)

Here once again he takes a truth and presses it too far, which produces an untruth or absurdity. For example, it is true that the Christian faith contains mysteries that can’t be fully explained through human language; it is also true that God cannot be *fully* explained by human language. However, it is absolutely and perilously untrue to posit such without being crystal clear that the Christian faith is not merely an inexplicable mystery, and it is possible to put much of it into words; further, that we can and must use words to “definitively” speak of God.

First, Christianity does have mysteries, but it is equally true that some mysteries have been explained by God in the Scripture (Matthew 13:11; Romans 11:25; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 15:51; Ephesians 1:9; 3:1-13; Colossians 1:26; Revelation 17:7); consequently, contrary to what Bell argues, these great mysteries have not only been communicated but explained by words. Second, apparently words, while not adequate to capture infinity, are able to actually communicate some things about eternity, God and infinity since God claims to have done so in His word (Deuteronomy 29:29). Lastly, if words are incapable of communicating truth in an understandable and certain way there simply is not a gospel. Also, Bell has apparently based *some* of his beliefs about God on the words of Scripture, and he has put his belief about God into words, which he just earlier argued can’t be done unless of course he means that none of what the Bible says is definitive

The truth is God gave us the Bible, in words and not pictures; so God put Himself in words, in order that He may be known and followed and proclaimed. Jesus said, if you love me you will keep my commandments—words (John 14:15). If that information is not communicated, how will people love the Savior? Peter at Pentecost preached a sermon with words, and God, by words, commands everyone everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

Bell likes to use metaphors and similes and extol uncertainties, flexibility, and community but not truth. The Scripture says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). He says “truth always leads to more...truth” (033), but he continually leaves the knowableness of truth uncertain and thereby undermines the teaching and communication of Scripture not to mention his quite contradictory claims to knowing what truth is, and isn’t, in this book.

The question then is, is there truth that can be known for certain, or does each community live in a milieu of endless questions, subjectivity and uncertainty? And if he does not

know certain truth, how can he know that what he says is not a lie, which only leads to more lies, not more truth. The Scripture is uncompromisingly clear that some things God has revealed so that we may know them for certain and proclaim them to the world (Matthew 28:18-20; John 20: 30-31; 1 John 5:13).

Fifth, his willingness to misrepresent those with whom he disagrees seems to be boundless.

I mentioned at the beginning some of the rhetorical devices that he uses, and that he is quick to say that we do not understand him, or we take him out of context, but that is in fact what he does.

The following example of his misrepresentation of the facts in order to prove his point is something I have firsthand personal knowledge of. If I seem a little too passionate about this, please forgive me. It is just that it is an undeniable example of what he does repeatedly in order to cast his new ideas in the best light.

I know something about this because I was there. What he is cryptically referring to on page 043 is the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, and our vote to adopt Article XVIII The Family and make it a part of “The Baptist Faith and Message”. I have included it in the footnotes¹³ in its entirety since it is painfully obvious that Bell never read the Article.

Here are a few insights into his mishandling of this situation: the context of his discussion on pages 042-043 is demonstrated by his statement that “sometimes...people are backing

¹³ **XVIII. The Family**

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption.

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.

Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage. Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth. Children are to honor and obey their parents.

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-25; 3:1-20; Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 1:26-28; Psalms 51:5; 78:1-8; 127; 128; 139:13-16; Proverbs 1:8; 5:15-20; 6:20-22; 12:4; 13:24; 14:1; 17:6; 18:22; 22:6,15; 23:13-14; 24:3; 29:15,17; 31:10-31; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 9:9; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:31-32; 18:2-5; 19:3-9; Mark 10:6-12; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Ephesians 5:21-33; 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 5:8,14; 2 Timothy 1:3-5; Titus 2:3-5; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

up their points and the Bible is used to prove that they are right, [and] everything within me says, ‘There is no way that’s what God meant by that verse.’”(043)

He then uses, as examples of this misuse of the Bible, such things as how people misused the Bible to defend slavery, promote Nazis, and how things are misused by cult leaders, televangelists, racists, and people who oppress minorities and the poor. (043-044)

In between his example of misusing the Bible to sanction slavery and Nazis, he refers to an annual meeting of a large Christian denomination that was in the news because they “voted to reaffirm their view of the importance of the verse that says a wife’s role is to submit to her husband.” Although he doesn’t give the verse, I will, and it is not actually a verse but several, explicitly Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1 and many others implicitly.

He then makes the following statements, “This is a big deal to them. This is what made news. This is what they are known for.” (043) He clearly implies that this is bad, which is evident by the company he placed the event with—slave owners and Nazis.

First, of course it is a big deal to Christians since the Bible puts enormous emphasis upon the family’s structure, importance, and role, and I would think it would be to Bell. Since the family is the basic building block of society, and is pivotal in passing on faith in God, you would think Bell would be applauding someone for speaking the truth in love against the tide of secularism that has almost succeeded in dismantling the home. I thought he extolled people like Luther who stood for truth?

Second, let me say, just because the news picks up on certain things and does not report others, like the ministry to mission fields, changed lives, etc, this is not the fault of the ones reported on. Further, shouldn’t he be glad that someone is speaking out for the biblical teaching of the family since it is being daily redefined by secularists with damning impact upon children, education, men and women, economics, crime, drugs, and spiritual lives, or is the biblical teaching on the family another of those disposable springs like the virgin birth, the Trinity....

Lastly, and most importantly, had he taken the time to read the entire Article, he would know that the wife’s role of submission was only one part of a brief but comprehensive setting forth of the biblical family including the husband’s responsibility to the wife, the wife to the husband, the parents to the children, and the children to the parents. All of the statements and/or teachings made concerning each of these relationships and responsibilities are explicitly taught, commanded in Scripture, and are not obscure references, but are the definitive passages on the family. But when you base your arguments on defeating straw men, facts and context simply do not matter.

He then goes on to pose his questions, “What about the verse before that verse? What about the verse after it? What about the verse that talks about women having authority over their husbands? What about all of the marriages in which this verse has been used to oppress and mistreat women?” (043-044) and then he closes this series of questions with

this conclusion, “It is possible to make the Bible say whatever we want it to, isn’t it?” (044) If he would have taken the time to read the Article, he would know that it included the previous verses to which he referred as well as the following verses and verses from the warp and woof of Scripture.

As far as the verse that he references about the wife having authority over the husband, which is 1 Corinthians 7:4, it actually says "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*" (1 Corinthians 7:4). Notice it is referring to the body. The context is precluding immorality and Satan’s temptations by a healthy sexual relationship between a husband and a wife; they have a mutual responsibility and they are one; hence, they are not the sole master over their own body. This truth is neither hidden in the article on the family nor incongruent with it. Again, had he read the Article, he would have known that the very verse he asked about is referenced. Moreover, one may rightly ask if he thinks this verse conflicts with or contradicts the verses teaching a wife to submit, or for that matter for a man to love his wife as Christ loves the church—die, lay down his body and his life for her.

Further, I am baffled by his logic. How do people who have misused a verse to mistreat women have any relationship to declaring what Scripture actually, repeatedly and explicitly says; except that once again, if truth were the issue, and it was knowable, then Bell would be glad that the lies that have been used to abuse women were exposed.

His conclusion that “it is possible to make the Bible say whatever we want it to” is true, and unfortunately his book serves as a premier reminder of that; however, the truthfulness of that statement in no way undermines the biblical explanation of the family in the article. The only way to argue against it is by the use of Scripture, and of course he will fail there.

This type of superficial knowledge, dependence on fallacies, misrepresenting the facts and ignoring context, and then making conclusions from that, is sadly very typical of his book. I do not know, nor question his motives, but the way he handles the Scripture paints a picture that simply does not represent the original.