

# Jumping Off the Mark: A Response to Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*

A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, by Rob Bell. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, 208 pages, \$19.99.

By all accounts, Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville Michigan, is a very “hip” guy. As Andy Crouch, a writer for *Christianity Today* remarked, “You could say he puts the *hip* in discipleship.”<sup>1</sup> But Bell is hip with an agenda. Inspired by Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*, Bell and other emergent pastors are “looking for a faith colorful enough for their culturally savvy friends, deep enough for mystery, big enough for their own doubts.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the stated goal of Bell’s new book, *Velvet Elvis*, is to help us “re-paint” the Christian faith in a way that helps people connect with Jesus today. On the back cover of his book, Bell invites the reader to “test everything.” This review is an attempt to do just that; to examine Bell’s rendering of the Christian faith and life, as it is presented in *Velvet Elvis*, in light of the Word of God.

I believe that Rob Bell is well intentioned. He is passionate about helping Christians break out of the drudgery of a traditional religion into a vibrant relationship with Christ and a culture transforming lifestyle. He is very eager to help people actually experience living out the commands of Christ. This is commendable and explains in large part his appeal to the largely churched Grand Rapids Christian community. We can learn from him here. It would be easy simply to take pot shots at Mars Hill and *Velvet Elvis* without acknowledging that “Christianity as usual” in this country and even in our own community truly is far less than what it ought to be!

However, *Velvet Elvis* is not a healthy book and the emergent church soil from which it springs is not healthy soil. Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and other leaders of the emergent church desperately want to redefine Christianity. Unfortunately, these men seem to have confused historic Christianity with the fundamentalist and/or megachurch circles from which they have come. Consequently, instead of a careful, biblical, critique of the evangelical model and a pursuit of a biblically sound, full-orbed Christianity, they have uncritically hitched their wagons to an intentionally postmodern model of Christianity which, being married to the spirit of the age, is doomed for quick widowhood.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* November 2004, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Os Guinness has a terrific discussion of this in his book *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). While emergent church leaders would almost certainly agree with Guinness as he challenges the megachurch’s unwitting adoption of

Interestingly, although emergent church leaders disagree with the seeker-sensitive, church-growth model of the church, they share the same underlying principle of pragmatism. The reason we need to “re-paint” and “rediscover” Christianity is because the old model doesn’t work anymore. Authors like Leonard Sweet argue that we need a new kind of Christianity, a postmodern Christianity, if we have any hope of reaching a postmodern world.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the subtle arrogance of such a proposition there is a beating principle of pragmatism. This movement seems to be fundamentally driven by the question, “What will work?” instead of the biblical question, “What has God said?”<sup>5</sup> In the pursuit of relevance and authenticity—the holy grail of the seeker-sensitive movement twenty years ago and the liberal church before that—this movement is also in danger of leaving historic, biblical Christianity behind. Consequently, it is destined to be one more “ism” in church history which ends up in the garbage heap of failed philosophies.

As I read the emergent leaders and Rob Bell in *Velvet Elvis*, I feel like I’m living in J. Gresham Machen’s classic *Christianity and Liberalism*. It seems the emergent church is going down precisely the same road the liberal movement took one hundred or so years ago. The liberals were saying that the key to understanding real Christianity and the “real” and “relevant” Jesus was through a higher-critical, “scientific” analysis of the Bible. This pursuit was seen as essential for reaching out to a scientific age. The emergent movement seems to have replaced higher criticism with Jewish studies and postmodern epistemology. Now the key to understanding real Christianity and the “real” and “relevant” Jesus is through an analysis of first century Jewish practices and a “Hebrew” mind-set which embraces mystery and doubt and prefers questions to answers. But both movements end up undermining the Bible as the authoritative Word of God; both undermine the gospel as the central issue of Scripture and calling of the church; and both, in the name of “enlightenment,” devastate the church.

## **SPECIFIC CONCERNS**

### **1. His View of the Bible as Metaphor**

Bell sees the Bible not primarily as God’s revealed word but as the

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modernism, it seems they have committed the same errors in relation to postmodernism. The core problem of cultural compromise remains.

<sup>4</sup> The subtitle of his recent book, *Soul Tsunami*, is telling . . . “Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). In Sweet’s view the church has two choices—either become emergent or disappear into cultural irrelevance. As Sweet explains, “The Dick-and-Jane world of my ‘50’s childhood is over, washed away by a tsunami of change. . . . While the world is rethinking its entire cultural formation, it is time to find new ways of being the church that are true to our postmodern context. It is time for a Postmodern Reformation” (17).

<sup>5</sup> Read D. A. Carson’s splendid critique of the Emergent Movement in his recent book *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

expression of the spiritual experience of God's people through the ages. . . . We have to embrace the Bible as the wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people experiencing the living God. Doubting the one true God.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible is a "human product . . . rather than the product of divine fiat."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Bible is helpful not primarily as the factual revelation of God's real acts in history, but as a metaphor to help us understand our own experiences.

Is the greatest truth about Adam and Eve that it happened or that it happens? This story . . . is true for us because it is *our* story. We have all taken the fruit. We have all crossed boundaries. . . . This is why the Bible loses its power for so many communities. They fall into the trap of thinking that the Bible is just about things that happened a long time ago.<sup>8</sup>

Now this seems attractive in that it seems to make the Bible alive and dynamic. But it does not square with how the Bible represents itself. The biblical writers do not use the Bible primarily or even secondarily as a metaphor to interpret one's own personal experience. The Bible is the account of God's acts of redemption and these things *matter*, first and foremost, because they are historically true—they really happened! Luke and Paul, for example, emphasized the historical detail and accuracy of the gospel events.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1–4).

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Cor. 15:3–8).

The biblical writers obviously believed that the purpose of Scripture is to tell us what God has actually done for us, not to provide stories to be used as metaphors of our own experience. Contrary to Bell, the primary importance of the fall is not that it "happens" but that it "happened." It is the historical and theological reality behind all the rest of the Bible, including Christ's coming. We are not asked to experience these stories metaphorically but to believe in the redemption they point us to. The experiential link

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<sup>6</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 062–063. Editor's note: the zeros in the page numbering of the Bell book are in the original.

<sup>7</sup> *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 058–059.

between the reader and the text is not metaphor but faith! “These are written *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *by believing* you may have life in his name” (John 20:31, emphasis added).

In other words, the key to experiencing and engaging the Scripture is not trying to discover a comparable experience in one’s own life, but in believing, and trusting in, and learning from the experiences of Jesus’ life. It is, after all, a book about *him*.

## 2. His Understanding of the Christian Faith

Bell, as a postmodern believer, emphasizes mystery and doubt as the keys to genuine Christian experience. Objective truth and concrete propositions concerning the nature of God, the Bible, and even Jesus Christ are seen as secondary at best, and at worst “bricks” which hinder a lively faith. Speaking with Andy Crouch, Bell’s wife, Kristen, confesses, “I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible, that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white and now it’s in color.”<sup>9</sup> The core elements of postmodern Christian faith do not seem to be “knowledge, assent and trust,” but mystery, doubt, and doing. This, of course, shifts the focus of faith from its objective content, Christ Jesus and him crucified, towards the individual’s experience of faith.

Faith, according to Bell, is a trampoline with doctrine functioning as the springs—they are helpful but not the point. The problem with many Christians is that they are so wrapped up in the nature of the springs they can’t enjoy the real “point” of Christianity, the experience of jumping. Bell compares these doctrinally minded people to masons who build their faith as a wall of bricks, each brick/doctrine carefully laid on top of the other. The problem with this view of faith is that if you pull out one of the bricks, the whole wall collapses.

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archeologists find Larry’s tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if, as you study the origin of the word “virgin” you discover that the word “virgin” in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word “virgin” could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being “born of a virgin” also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? What if that spring were seriously questioned? Could a person keep on jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Crouch, *Christianity Today*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 026.

Bell's answer? "If the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn't that strong in the first place was it?"<sup>11</sup> In other words, Bell advocates a faith that is impervious to a mythologized virgin birth. This faith can "go on jumping" even if it were shown that Jesus was born of Larry and the gospel writers knowingly "threw in" myth.

There are two points I would like to make in response to this. First, it is important to realize that Bell, himself, believes in a literal incarnation. "I affirm the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity and the inspiration of the Bible and much more."<sup>12</sup>

But the issue of orthodoxy is not simply what one personally chooses to believe concerning Christ, but what is necessary to believe concerning Christ. The church has historically understood the creeds to be a summary of what-is-necessary-to-believe in order to be an orthodox Christian. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds both clearly profess that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit *as a necessary component of true faith*. A literal virgin birth as a necessary doctrine is not simply a hang-up of modernistic evangelicalism. It has been a part of the church's profession through all its ages and in all its branches from the beginning. By failing to insist on a literal virgin birth as part of what-is-necessary-to-believe, Bell has taken the sadly well-traveled road of liberalism. Many of the 1,293 Presbyterian ministers who signed the Auburn Affirmation of 1923 personally affirmed the literal truth of the five fundamentals.<sup>13</sup> But they did not believe a literal interpretation should be deemed as *necessary* in order to be a minister in good standing in the Presbyterian Church! As they wrote:<sup>14</sup>

Some of us regard the particular (literal) theories contained in the deliverances of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 027.

<sup>12</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 027.

<sup>13</sup> The Auburn Affirmation was a protest against the perceived "Fundamentalism" in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The document claims that while a "literal" understanding of the virgin birth, miracles, inspiration of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and Jesus' resurrection is acceptable, they should not be the only accepted "theory" of interpretation allowed in the church. A literal interpretation of these things was not *necessary* for true faith.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that there are not areas in the Confession that do not allow a proper Christian liberty. The length of the creation days would be an example of this in the OPC.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from an article by Gordon Clark entitled "The Auburn Heresy." Available online at <http://opc.org/cce/clark.html>.

The line that divides heresy from orthodoxy is not fixed on what one personally believes concerning Christ, but what one understands as necessary to believe. Bell, here, is simply on the wrong side of orthodoxy.

Secondly, Bell seems to be both adopting the liberals' method and doing so for the very same reasons. Bell wants to strengthen faith by resting it on the experience of Christ rather than certain historical facts. A faith which needs a literal virgin birth was "not that strong to begin with."<sup>16</sup> In the onslaught of the Scientific Revolution, well-intentioned but misguided theologians tried to protect faith from the attacks of nosey archeologists and persistent scientists in the same way. Thus the "experience" of the spirit of Christ was the "resurrection" that mattered. Bell agrees. "We live in metaphors . . . The tomb is empty because we have met the risen Christ—we have experienced Jesus in a way that transcends space and time. And this gives us hope."<sup>17</sup>

But what does the Bible really say about all this? Does the resurrection matter as a metaphor or as a historical reality? In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul responds to those who wanted to take out just that one pesky "spring" concerning a literal resurrection from the dead. With no appeal to metaphor, he said, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:13–14, 17).

Is a literal virgin birth any less essential to a true biblical faith? Would not Paul say the same thing to Rob Bell? A faith which does not need a literal virgin birth is not a faith that saves because, in the end, it doesn't need a historical Jesus at all. It's all about jumping.<sup>18</sup>

### **3. His View of the Nature of Sin**

Rob speaks of a time in his life when he was getting burned out trying to be "super-pastor." He reveals the advice of his counselor which helped him come to grips with the essence of his sin. "He said, in what has become a pivotal moment in my journey, 'Your job is the relentless pursuit of who God has made you to be. Anything else you do is sin and you need to repent of it.'<sup>19</sup>

Once again, this sounds appealing and there are parts of this which are helpful. In this portion of the book Rob is trying to help people stop living under the burden of an

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<sup>16</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 027.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 061.

<sup>18</sup> It is astonishing that Bell, a product of evangelical bastions such as Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary, cannot discern the rank liberalism flowing off the tip of his own pen. His evangelical fathers fought those who had adopted Bell's position. The liberals insisted that emphasizing a literal virgin birth, real miracles, an inspired inerrant Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and the physical resurrection of Jesus would leave the faith vulnerable to the attacks of science. But in their attempts to "strengthen" the faith, they gutted it. Now, as the evidence of that failed experiment in heterodoxy are more prevalent than ever, why would Bell want to head down this same path?

<sup>19</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 114.

idealized version of what they are supposed to be and accept who they are. This is an important part of accepting God's grace.

And yet . . . the Bible speaks of sin and grace in so much more profound and accurate terms. Where does the Bible ever suggest that our primary calling is "the relentless pursuit of who God has made us to be"? Bell makes it sound as if the essence of godliness is self-realization. His "sin" was that he was trying to be "super-pastor," something which went contrary to his personal make-up. He's too creative and spontaneous and whatever to fit that mold. His "repentance" was a matter of deciding to "kill super-pastor" and be true to himself.

How is this not simply a baptized version of our cultural morality where the greatest "sin" is precisely the failure to be true to yourself? I just don't see this emphasis in Scripture. When did Paul ever suggest that his primary calling was to discover himself or be true to his own personality traits? He refused to be a "super-apostle" not because it wasn't true to his personality, but because it was untrue to the gospel! They relied on their speaking gifts; Paul relied on the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12 Paul boasted of his weaknesses, not his unique abilities, so that the power of Christ would be evident in and through him. And when Paul tells the church to live according to what they *are*, "children of the light" (Eph. 5:8), he is calling them to imitate God and his Son, Jesus (Eph. 5:1–2)! The critical issue isn't being true to their personality traits or interests, but being true to their calling to think and act and live like Christ! What separates and distinguishes *Christian* morality from all other morality is precisely the person of Christ. (The devil is profoundly "true to himself" and "authentic.")

Why doesn't Bell talk about sin like the Bible does? The Bible speaks of sin and godliness with an intentionally, consistently Godward reference. Sin is anything and everything which falls short of the glory of God. Holiness is speaking and thinking and being motivated in all my actions by a pure love for and fear of God. Isn't this the message a self-saturated culture like ours needs to hear?

#### **4. His View of God's Faith in Man**

The self-ward bent of Bell's teaching continues when he speaks of God's faith in man. Bell adopts his self-professed rabbi Ray Vander Laan's teaching that Jesus chose his disciples just like every other rabbi of his day—because he believed in their innate abilities. In one of the most painful parts of the book, Bell reminds us of the story found in Matthew 14:22ff. where Peter rushed out of the boat to meet Jesus walking on the water. Peter began to sink and Jesus rebuked him for his lack of faith.

Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; he is doing fine. Peter loses faith in himself. Peter loses faith that he can do what his rabbi is doing. If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes that you can actually be like him. As we read the stories of Jesus' life with his talmidim, his disciples, what do we find frustrates him to no end? When his disciples lose faith in themselves . . . Notice how many places in the accounts of Jesus life he gets frustrated with his disciples. Because they are

incapable? No, because of how capable they are. He sees what they could be and could do, and when they fall short it provokes him to no end. It isn't their failure that's the problem, it's their greatness. They don't realize what they are capable of . . . God has an amazingly high view of people. God believes that people are capable of amazing things. I've been told I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I'm learning is that Jesus believes in me. . . . God has faith in me.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, according to Bell, God has such great faith in the abilities of men that Jesus “left the future of the movement (the church) in their hands. And he doesn't stick around to make sure they don't screw it up. He's gone. He trusts that they can actually do it.”<sup>21</sup> This is a shocking reinterpretation of the Christian faith. When the gospel becomes the message of God coming to earth and dying on a cross to help men believe how great they really are—something is horribly amiss. This has the stench of blasphemy.

Even a cursory review of what the Bible actually says shows the utter fallacy of this teaching. When Peter heard Jesus' words and was rescued by him he didn't apologize for failing to realize his full potential. He worshiped Christ with the other men saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matt. 14:33). When Jesus ascended into heaven he clearly instructed them to remain in Jerusalem and “wait for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4) and reminded them, “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).” This is the same Jesus who told his disciples, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This “new teaching” simply fails the Berean Scripture test (Acts 17:11).

Whenever the Bible speaks of why God chooses people to follow him, it *never* suggests that it's because God believes in us. Just listen to a familiar verse re-interpreted according to Bell's teaching.

And God said to Joshua, be strong and very courageous because I know you can do this. You've had great military training, you have a keen mind, and you are a great commander. Go in and take the land. Do not be afraid. I chose you because I believe you are capable of amazing things.

Does that sound right? What does the text actually say? “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, *for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go*” (Josh. 1:9, emphasis added). And Joshua got the point. As the people came to the Jordan, we read: “Joshua said to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow *the LORD will do wonders among you*’ ” (Josh. 3:5, emphasis added).

The whole story of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan is intended to highlight *God's* amazing abilities, not man's. In fact, whenever the Bible speaks of why God chooses people it always highlights the *inabilities* of man so that *God's* receives all the glory!

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<sup>20</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 133–134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples (Deut. 7:7).

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for *you are a stubborn people* (Deut. 9:5–6, emphasis added).

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God*. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*” (1 Cor 1:26–31, emphasis added).

Bell has erred in taking a practice of the Jewish Rabbi’s and ascribing it to God who says, “My ways are not your ways.” Bell’s view is not only misleading, it is directly contrary to what God himself actually says. This teaching robs God of the glory of his condescending grace in salvation and actually ascribes glory to the sinner. This is a tragic and serious misstep, for the Living God takes his glory very seriously. “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another” (Isa. 48:11).

## **5. Bell’s View of the Nature of the Atonement**

Bell teaches that Jesus died for everyone and has actually reconciled everyone to God. Everyone is already loved by God the Father as a reconciled, forgiven sinner in Christ. They simply need to choose to live in that reality or not.

So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross he was reconciling ‘all things, in heaven and on earth,’ to God. 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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 146. Implied is the lack of the necessity of repenting and believing the gospel.

According to Bell, Jesus' death actually and really accomplished the forgiving of everyone's sins and the reconciliation of everybody to the Father. In other words, God's wrath has been propitiated for everyone. He now loves everybody in the same way and sees everyone as robed in the righteousness of Christ. All that is left is for people to "live in this new reality."

But, again, how does that match up with what the Bible actually says? Jesus says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but *the wrath of God remains on him*" (John 3:36, emphasis added).

Peter seemed to share Jesus' belief that, apart from gospel faith and repentance, people are not yet forgiven by God or reconciled to God. When the crowd at Pentecost asked Peter "What must we do to be saved?" he did not assure them that they were already forgiven and reconciled. Rather, he called them to "repent and be baptized" in order to receive the forgiveness of their sins. Paul pleaded with sinners to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). He clearly believed that God's wrath was a remaining reality and present danger for all those who had not yet confessed Christ. In fact, he told the Jews that "because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5). Hardly the words of a man who believed "everybody" was already reconciled. Rather, Paul called people to "save themselves from the wrath that is to come" by repenting and believing.

How can you square Bell's reading of Paul's ministry with Paul's own description offered in Acts 19:19–20? Paul, defending his ministry before King Agrippa, says: "a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."

Once again, Rob Bell seems to be teaching something directly contrary to the Word of God. This doctrine is not only erroneous, it has disastrous results. Bell's error here is precisely what has led to the abysmal decline of missions in the mainline churches. After all, if the nations are already reconciled to God because of Christ, why bother them with pesky, fundamentalist missionaries who demean them by telling them they still need to be saved from the wrath that is to come? If Bell's teaching is true, think of all the martyrs (beginning with Stephen) who needlessly died because they insisted that people needed to repent in order to be saved?<sup>23</sup> How many missionaries could have escaped

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<sup>23</sup> Bell's theology does not seem to require a biblical version of repentance since he believes that Christ's death has actually, truly procured peace with God for everyone. No one is outside of God's favor. In a recent article he decrees, "The whole system that says these few people, because of what they said, did, believe, etc., are going to Heaven and everybody else is going to Hell, is deeply flawed and must die." (Relevant Magazine, No. 31, Jan-Feb 2008, 67.) In other words, gospel faith and repentance are not necessary for peace with God or escape from divine wrath. In his recent "the gods are not angry" tour Bell defined repentance as "what happens when your eyes are opened and *you see what has already been done*. 'I've missed it, and now I see it'." (Emphasis mine. For a great review see Jesse Johnson's post at <http://www.sfplp.com/2007/11/21/rob-bell-the-gods-should-be-angry/>). Paul Kaiser attended the lecture

martyrdom by telling people they simply “need to live in a new reality”? Where is the offense in Bell’s gospel? And if it isn’t there, how can it possibly be the gospel of Christ?

## **Conclusion**

If nothing else, *Velvet Elvis* serves as a terrific wake-up call to the Reformed community. The enthusiastic support Bell receives in the “Reformed bastion” of Grand Rapids needs to stir us to action. Well-meaning people are being influenced by Bell’s ministry simply because they are looking for a vibrant faith. The spiritual lethargy and too-common spiritual dryness of confessional Christianity has left great numbers of believers open to the enthusiasm of Bell’s ministry. While we need to stand against the errors of Bell’s theology, we also need, with equal vigor, to pursue vibrant, Spirit-filled, biblically sound ministries of our own. The best argument we can make for the truth that the gospel is good news *about Christ Jesus*, and that *Christ* sovereignly saves sinners and builds his church is to be vibrant examples of that fact. As is so often the case, false teaching is the heritage of lethargic orthodoxy. May God find us faithful.

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and adds “Bell mangled the definition of repentance, stating that repentance is not turning from sin. Rather, he says it is a “celebration” of life in Christ. He further stated that anyone who tells you that you need to repent is not talking about Christianity.” [“The gods may not be angry but has Rob Bell went (sic) mad? November 28, 2007 <http://reformedevangelist.com/?p=558>].