

# Smashing Brickworld ; A Review of Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis"

<http://ascenttotruth.blogspot.com/>

Saturday, April 07, 2007

## Smashing Brickworld: Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis" - Part 1

So there was this quote making its rounds on the internet from a book called "Velvet Elvis" written by Rob Bell. (I say 'making its rounds' because the internet is a [series of tubes](#)... in case you didn't know. Listen to the whole thing - it's worth it) Bell sets up a metaphor where faith is a trampoline, and the springs "aren't God...aren't Jesus... [they] are statements and beliefs about our faith that help give words to the depths that we are experiencing in our jumping. I would call these the doctrines of our faith."

The quote that's been drawing fire goes like this:

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologist 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?

Questions. Big questions, right?  
Was Jesus born of a virgin?  
What if...?

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?

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?

What if... Mary wasn't a virgin in the way we understand it? The way you handle this question determines how you read this book.

### **Questions and Metaphors**

All metaphors have their limits of course. They are much like cars – they all eventually break down. In my own limited metaphor, the string of reason and doctrine tethers the kite of faith and consequent action. Lose the kite and the string falls limp; lose the string and the tension and restraint that allows the kite to fly is gone. Freed from its tether, the kite may initially surge upwards, but it eventually returns to the ground, no longer capable of flight.

Reading the book brought to mind a few questions of my own, and I will try to be kind and careful in asking them. Bible scholar [Ben Witherington](#) has set the bar with his balanced critique of Rob's book in his post "[Velvet Elvis and the King'-- Has he Left the Building?](#)" I want to follow his lead here but I have to admit that I am more disturbed by the content of this book than he is.

**Sunday, April 08, 2007**

## **[Smashing Brickworld: Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis" - Part 2](#)**

### **The Good**

I commend Bell for encouraging an eschatological shift from a "when we get over yonder" to a "let's bring heaven here" theology. He would do well, however, to remember that the previous generation was not wrong in longing for heaven, but rather in making this longing the dominant theological sentiment. Let's not allow the pendulum to swing completely and lose our longing to be with Jesus in eternity.

Bell's focus on the renewal God desires for us beyond his forgiveness of us as individuals is sharp and needed. "To make the cross of Jesus just about human salvation," he says on page 161 "is to miss that God is interested in saving everything." He's correct in pointing out that this aspect of salvation is absent in many theological systems. God wants to renew us as individuals to be sure, but through us he wants to renew our relationships and our culture as well.

But it is also important to remember that the fullness of this renewal will happen only when Christ returns. What is so often spoken of as "bringing heaven down" must not be confused as an ability on our part to establish that which Christ alone will establish upon his return.

The nomenclature of evangelicalism is in dire need of refreshment, but just as the word "Christian" is saddled with much detrimental baggage, so are many other words and phrases that are nonetheless still accurate and useful. There is a tendency to set up a reality to fight against that doesn't actually exist in a lot of places. The worst parts of evangelicalism are taken and a composite is made that looks really bad. For example, maybe somewhere it's useful to NEVER use the word religion and to say "Christ-follower" instead of "Christian" - but its not that useful in the context I've been placed in and creating a giant false dichotomy between the two is more of a distraction than a help.

All that to say: what goes in Grand Rapids may not be what is needed everywhere.

I also like the Nooma videos that I've seen. There wasn't anything about them that set me off. The production is excellent, the content is compelling, and the effect is positive overall.

### **The Issues**

As [G. K. Chesterton](#) said "The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." There seems to be a desire in much of the emerging church movement to favour personal experience at the expense of belief in anything labeled "orthodox". This is not a search of a new orthodoxy; it is a way of wrapping orthodoxy around experience. When faith and belief are made subservient to experience, there is little hope for objective truth.

An open mind is a good thing, and admiring mystery is beneficial, but imbuing with mystery that which is no longer mysterious is simply a gateway to untethered mysticism. A preference for what is unclear can make mysterious that which need not be.

So why plant the idea that the gospels might be peppered with pagan mythology and that this was done by the writers of the gospels to gain some sort of cultural traction? According to [Ben Witherington](#) this line of reasoning is not even relevant:

The cult of Mithras does not seem to have existed properly speaking before the late first century A.D. It is of no relevance to discussion NT books, and in particular the Jesus tradition;

The cults of Mithras and Attis and Dionysius were not religious cults which centered on real historical persons, unlike Christianity. As such they did not talk about actual virgin births any more than they talked about bodily resurrections of a person like Jesus. It is simply not true as well that Julius Caesar or other Emperors were said to be born of virgins. Remarkable births or births signaled by comets are one thing, virgin births another.

Introducing these ideas seems to discredit the gospels and as a back door introduces the concept of molding truth to fit culture rather than shaping culture with truth.

There is much focus here and in the emerging movement in general on eliminative action. "If only we would do *this*, AIDS/poverty/loneliness would be wiped out." These are noble goals to be sure. Christ said both that we should feed the hungry, but that the poor would always be with us. Our actions, then, aren't designed to eliminate, but to alleviate. Of course Christ's statement should never be used as an excuse for inaction but neither should it be ignored completely.

In keeping with the Biblical metaphor of being salt, we are to be salt that we might prevent or slow the decay of this world. Salt does not rehabilitate, it slows decomposition. This should not be seen as a resignation to failure, but as a looking forward with anticipation to that which Christ will accomplish.

I agree with Bell that honest doubt and intellectual investigation are important to forming a robust faith. [Bill Coleman](#) is the Pastor of the church I attend and when I ran the quote by him he replied that

"Examining or rethinking a matter does not make it fall apart, in fact, it should do the opposite. It should confirm it one way or the other."

This sums up what I find problematic about Bell's book: He seems eager to examine and rethink but not to come to any conclusions.

**Sunday, April 15, 2007**

### **[Smashing Brickworld: Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis" - Part 3](#)**

#### **What is lost?**

Ultimately the question raised by the quote is this: What do we lose if we lose the virgin birth?

I will attempt to answer it: We lose Jesus. We lose his divinity. We lose his claims about himself and the claims of the apostles about him, and that has infinite and eternal consequences. But if we only lose this one spring, is Bell saying it's OK because there are plenty of others supporting

us?

But let's examine Bell's metaphor as it stands:

Is the meaning of the quote that the virgin birth is simply one of many expendable, expandable, and ultimately disposable springs? But isn't this doctrine woven into the very fabric of our faith? Remove this spring, then another like it, and another, and our jumping becomes more difficult and eventually impossible.

Bell comes short of actually removing the spring by asking if our faith would fall apart if we "reexamine and rethink one spring." But what is this reexamining and rethinking? If the inspection turns up a faulty part, should it be left in place? Why retain a belief that turned out to be false?

How many springs can be removed before the jumping stops?

Which, if any, are off limits?

When do we cease to call the trampoline a Christian faith?

By implying that all doctrines are of equal weight, Bell paints over the difference between that which is settled and that which is still open for debate. [Mark Driscoll](#) describes this dichotomy as ideas that are either in the open hand or the closed hand.

There are not many Christians, Protestant or Catholic, who would argue that all doctrines are of equal weight. And of course there is room for debate, among Protestants anyway, about what is dogma (truth) and what is doctrine (teaching). I know Bell wants us to hold these beliefs as our own and not simply because they were given to us by our parents, and thus he asks us to examine them, to test them. But it is equally unwise to question excessively or reject those beliefs because our parents gave them to us.

[Ben Witherington](#):

"On p.26 we hear about what "being born of a virgin" means. In the course of this discussion Rob claims that the word 'virgin' in Hebrew could mean several things. Well in the first place, we do not have the word 'virgin' in Isaiah 7.14 in the Hebrew text we have *almah* which means a nubile young woman of marriage age. In an honor and shame culture like that, this would certainly imply the virginity of the girl in question, but would not focus exclusively on that trait. There is a word for virgin in Hebrew, but this is not it. It is the Greek OT, not the Hebrew that has the term virgin (*parthenos*) which Matthew follows in Mt. 1 when he quotes the Isaiah text."

Let's take a look at the biblical text in Luke 1: 26-38 (ESV):

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

At the end of Bell's scenario there is no learning other than he tells us he believes in the virgin birth (and for the record, I truly believe he does). But he just gave us a number of compelling arguments NOT to believe, so why in the face of these compelling arguments does he still believe? I wish he'd used something more debatable or, conversely, if this is only a lesson in constructive thinking, why not use something less debatable and more controversial? Why not use the resurrection? That too has been debated and attempts at refuting it have been numerous.

### **A Place For Certainty**

We must be wary of the despair found in chosen uncertainty. I have experienced that despair. We must not love mystery so much that we create it where there is none. I am not uncomfortable with Bell's book because I am afraid to challenge my own beliefs. On the contrary, I am cautious about hyperextending my doubt at the expense of weakening my faith because I have been down that road a few times. It leaves scars. Balance is needed.

What can be known for certain, if not empirically then because scripture says it is certain, should be stated as such.

**Wednesday, April 18, 2007**

### **[Smashing Brickworld: Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis" - Part 4](#)**

#### **Trampoline vs. Brickworld**

The opposite of Bell's trampoline metaphor of faith is what he calls "brickworld". In brickworld, "you spend a lot of time talking about how right you are. Which of course leads to how wrong everybody else is. Which then leads to defending the wall." In describing the structure of Brickworld Bell says,

"... a brick is fixed in size. It can't flex or change, because if it does, then it can't fit into the wall. What happens then is that the wall becomes the sum total of the beliefs, and God becomes as big as the wall. But God is bigger than any wall. God is bigger than any religion. God is bigger than any worldview. God is bigger than the Christian faith."

The trouble with these metaphors is that they too narrowly imagine the spectrum of belief. They unfairly characterize them as polar opposites, and as such there is an impression that these are the only two options. You either have a flexible faith where everything can be – or should be - constantly questioned or you are an arrogant theological blowhard with set beliefs and positions that you are not willing to change – ever!

That segment of Christianity does exist, but it certainly is not the only alternative to the trampoline

metaphor of faith. Bell's dissatisfaction with some modern theological systems is understandable and something I share, but substituting a postmodern thought system for one of many faulty modern ones is only replacing bricks with water - one can't be changed, the other can never be pinned down.

In effect, Bell exchanges the hope of authoritative interpretation for the liberty of extreme personal interpretation. Forget the centuries of belief and wrestling with the Holy Spirit that brought about many of our doctrines. Not, as he clarifies, that he doesn't believe in them but are they really THAT important? This hedging of the bet is not effective in this situation. If certain doctrines turn out not to be true after all, a great many things will change.

Bell affirms his belief in the virgin birth and the trinity, but of what possible value can this affirmation be? If he doesn't consider it essential to our faith, why should we care that he says he believes? What are the criteria for setting the things that ARE essential? Is there ANYTHING that IS essential?

### **Postmodern Ministry**

There is a way to minister to postmoderns but it is not by adopting the philosophy of relative truth and individual interpretation and offering them a theology that values pragmatism (what works) over clarity (what's true). As much as anyone, I am overjoyed when "what works" and "what's true" are the same thing, but that isn't always the case. A great weakness of liberalism is that it imposes 21st century political correctness on the gospels and by doing so robs the gospel of much of its power. It avoids the reality that the content of the Gospels offends the rich and the poor alike, and does so on the grounds that we are all sinners.

We cannot offer people a "what works for them at the moment" in place of a "God has said" and expect them to see God. Christianity might work for them for a time but if it's working primarily on their terms it will fall away as soon as those terms are offended.

Eric Wyatt is a smart guy I know. He said:

Christ wasn't a self-help guru for the Jews. Even less so is Christ the self-help answer for the post-modern era. Following Christ will change your outlook, not your luck. Yes, the Father wants to give His children what is good for them, but what He considers truly "good" often has nothing to do with what we think is good.

### **Words, words, words**

In today's religious and political climate, the word "Christian" deservedly carries a lot of baggage. But let's not kill the carrier at the expense of having him drop that baggage. The way to rid the word of baggage is to do simply that – go after the baggage. We need to contextualize in a way that gets into people's cultural baggage and shows them that the gospel is versatile enough to lighten their load, not in a way that attempts to adapt the gospel to their baggage.

Half of my generation, anyone who grew up in the church anyway, is so totally burnt out on information (theological and otherwise) that many of us have this sinking feeling that if so many people passionately believe so many opposing positions that there must not be objective truth. In short – we don't know whom to trust. The other half of my generation is so theologically illiterate they can't tell the difference between clear truth and obvious error and are thus easily led away from the truth.

The trampoline metaphor seems to place all doctrine on equal footing and therefore of equal "take it or leave it" value. Can each person's Christianity be so radically different, like a choose-your-own-adventure story?

### **What it says, or what you think it says?**

On page 54 Bell advises:

When you hear people say they are just going to tell you what the Bible means, it is not true. They are telling you what they think it means. They are giving their opinions of the Bible... The problem is, it is not true.

This is paradoxical to say the least as Bell then proceeds to tell us what the Bible actually does say about a great number of things. If he tells us unequivocally that something is "just not true", is he claiming to know what IS true and what the Bible really IS saying... and if he is, isn't it just his opinion? Isn't it just what he THINKS it means?

The questions that follow are obvious:

Is his opinion truer than everyone else's?

Should we approach his teachings with the same skepticism he's just advised to approach everyone else's teachings with?

On what authority does he claim that his "opinions" are any more valid than everyone else's?

Is it all relative?

**Sunday, April 22, 2007**

### **[Smashing Brickworld: Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis" - Part 5](#)**

#### **Binding and Loosing**

Jesus gave his disciples power: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom..." (Matt 16 and 18). Bell sees this as a gift that keeps on giving, reaching into our time and into our lives. "If we take Jesus seriously," he says, "and actually see it as our responsibility to bind and to loose, the implications are endless, serious, and exhilarating." The limits of binding and loosing are unclear. For example, can we bind what the apostles loosed, or loose what they bound?

Binding and loosing seems a very malleable concept in Bell's theology. For several pages he goes on about it, painting it as something essentially (and ironically) non-binding. Some have bound this, others have loosed this other thing.

As Ben Witherington observes:

The mistake of using the later rabbinic grid to interpret Jesus leads to mistakes in interpreting Jesus' words. For example when Jesus speaks about binding and loosing, he is not referring to forbidding and allowing certain ways of interpreting OT verses. To bind refers to making a ruling that is binding, not forbidding it. To loose means to free someone from obligation to keep a particular rule.

Bell's take on the issue is this:

The Bible has to be interpreted. Decisions have to be made about what it means, today. The Bible is always coming through the interpretation of someone. And that's because binding and loosing requires awareness. Awareness that everybody's understanding of the Bible rests on somebody's binding and loosing.

But again, Bell's teaching is only as good as his sources. Ben Witherington again:

Rob, since he wants to stress the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers, needs to have a better understanding of early Judaism in a number of ways. In the first place, Jesus was no rabbi. So far as we can tell, there is no archaeological evidence at all for bet Talmud or bet Midrash in Jesus' day in Galilee. There were some schools in Jerusalem but they were far from Galilee.

Bell says that Jesus is "giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible. He is giving them permission to say 'Hey, I think we missed it before on that verse, and we've recently come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means'."

I have absolutely no argument with statements such as "Jesus expects his followers to be engaged in the endless process of deciding what it means to actually live the scriptures." No argument. But that is application, not interpretation. Something must remain solid as a reference lest we jump from one teetering rock to the next until we finally reach the cliff and jump off.

Bell expands his ideas about interpretation:

For most of church history people heard the bible read aloud in a room full of people. You heard it, discussed it, studied it, argued about it, and then made decisions about it as a group, as a community.

But this does not match with the example of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 where "The apostles and the elders came together to consider this matter." It was not the community that decided what was going to be the governing principle, it was the apostles and elders. To cast the situation otherwise, for example as a purely democratic process among a population with no heads of authority, is to cast is falsely.

This idea is also problematic for someone transplanted into a community that believes differently than they do. Who is right? How will truth be determined? Or will there simply be an agreement to disagree?

### **Another Spring**

If only Bell had used a different spring for his example.

There are not that many things that **MUST** be believed in order for a man to be saved, but to continue in this infant form of faith, or worse to praise it as the ideal is certainly unwise. 1 Peter says "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love."

Bell is making an erroneous leap from "there is little you **MUST** believe to be saved" to "so

obviously those other things are not THAT important".

Another observation from Pastor Coleman:


"The amount of content a person has to accept to be saved or to be called a Christian is a harder question. Jesus said that the faith of a child was sufficient. For me, when I gave my heart to Christ I didn't know much, but I believed that Jesus did, in fact, die for me on the cross. Ultimately, salvation is based on opening one's heart to Christ and the amount of content is quite small.

However, Paul said that if Christ was not raised from the dead, we are still in our sins. So, obviously, from the biblical perspective, there is an irreducible minimum of what happened historically before the Christian faith falls apart. If Christ did not die for us on the cross or be raised from the dead, then, there is no Christian faith other than following a spiritual leader and his morality or values."

And to sum it up with a bit of humour (which I always seem to forget to include in these discussions) Pastor Coleman says, "Of course the ultimate proof is: Larry is the name of a famous cucumber - not Jesus' father."

.....

There is some good discussion happening at the following group:

 **Smashing Brickworld - Discussing Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis"** [Visit this group \(http://groups.google.com/group/smashingbrickworld?hl=en \)](http://groups.google.com/group/smashingbrickworld?hl=en)

Thanks for reading. If you'd rather not post at the discussion group and would rather send comments directly, send them to [michael@michaelkrahn.com](mailto:michael@michaelkrahn.com)