



INTRODUCTION

Recently I was asked my thoughts and opinions about a guy called Rob Bell. Our youth pastor came having seen some video or other and wanted to know if I knew of Rob Bell and what if any opinions I had. The reality was I had no opinions because I had never heard of the guy. However, I did agree to find out and a quick search on Amazon revealed a book called “Velvet Elvis” which I promptly purchased.

Having now read the book “Velvet Elvis” I decided to take the author at his word and did just what he invites the reader to do ...

Speaking of testing and probing books that are labelled 'Christian' he says “Do that with this book. Don't swallow it uncritically. Think about it, Wrestle with it. Just because I'm a Christian and I'm trying to articulate a Christian world view doesn't mean I've got it nailed. I'm contributing to the discussion. God has spoken, and the rest is commentary, right?” (Velvet Elvis - Pg 87)

Below is my commentary, some thoughts on what I read and what I wrestle with.

IN GENERAL

There were some good points in this book that caused me to think and be inspired, but they were very few and very far between and for me were totally overshadowed by the theological howlers that seemed to be very deliberate deviations from orthodox Christian doctrine rather than an inadvertent excersion from them.

Please, when you read my comments do not think there is nothing I can agree on in this book, there is. Please do not think I have anything against Rob Bell, I don't. Please do not think I'm looking for a fight, I'm not. I'm just reviewing the book, explaining my thoughts and thinking for those who are interested as Rob himself encouraged us to do.



RABBINICAL TEACHING

Bell seems to rely heavily on rabbinical teaching which can, I think, bring some historical insight, cultural understanding and period contextualisation but not holy spirit inspired revelation. The bottom line is that these Jewish scholars are by definition ignorant of Jesus and at best can only bring a very limited and historic perspective to us. I believe that all scripture points to Jesus and as such those that do not recognise the one the scriptures points to are unlikely to those to guide us towards him!

RELATIVISM & PLURALISM

Relativism is the product of the post modern age where nothing can be absolute. There is no such thing as absolute truth for example, its all relative. What is true for you may not be true for me. No one right way any more. The Jesus of the bible is the same yesterday, today and forever ([Heb 13:8](#)). He is absolute! He is the truth ([John 14:6](#)) and so by definition truth is absolute and unchanging.

“Jesus at one point claimed to be ‘the way, the truth, and the life’. Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions. That completely misses the point, the depth, and the truth. Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality“. (Page 21 - Velvet Elvis)

This smacks of a some kind of relative truth and suggests that what it is all about is a “Depth of Reality” that one can find and Jesus is a way of doing that! *“Pluralism is the belief that reality consists of many parts” (CARM)* which seems to me to be exactly what Bell is suggesting here all be it of greater “depth” than others.

Jesus was not making a claim about any religion and certainly not that one was better than another. He was making a statement about God stating that there is only one God, Yahweh ([Isaiah 44:6](#)), and that there is only one way to him and that is through Jesus ([John 14:6](#)). This is a slippery slope and “may” indicate a leaning by Bell towards universalism. Jesus is not “indicating” a way, of which there may be others, that lead to a better depth of reality he is emphasising the single and only way, not to a philosophical reality, but to salvation! ([Acts 4:12](#)).

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

The virgin birth is one of the mainstays of orthodox Christianity. However, Bell looks to dislodge it from our theology as a non-essential element of doctrine.

“What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists 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?” (Page 26 - Velvet Elvis)



Lets consider Bells hypothesis “Virgin might not mean what it means”. If it might not mean “having never had sexual intercourse” but could mean had it once, but that does not count, I’m still a virgin, then I find Mary and Joseph’s responses to the news very strange. But what does the bible actually tell us? Well first of all when Mary is told that she will be pregnant I can’t imagine why she would say “How can this be?” (Luke 1:34-35) If she had had full sexual intercourse even just the once. She would know that even if she had done it just that one time that there was a good possibility (as many teenage mums in our culture will testify) that she could have become pregnant and therefore her response would not be one of “How” but more of “busted”! Bell’s suggestion that Larry might be the father and not Joseph is one Joseph himself considered because he knew for a fact he was not the father. Joseph had this question answered by the angel of God who clearly bats this suggestion out of the park when he clearly and precisely explains that the father is not man, but the holy spirit! (Mat 1:20)

For us to consider that the father of Jesus was human is to deny the clear teaching of scripture. Scripture tells us the answer to the “Larry Question” so there is nothing to even consider on that front. With regard to the “Virgin” question too that is just as preposterous as I have demonstrated. Virgin means a woman having never had sexual union with a man! The virgin birth is prophesied in the Old Testament, the New Testament records it clearly and the response of Mary clearly demonstrate that she was a virgin in the way we understand that word to mean.

Bells point here is that he likens these types of doctrine to the “Springs in a Trampoline” rather than the more traditional “Bricks in a Wall”. His point is to say that if the virgin birth was not true, as he alludes to above, then he can live without that as part of doctrine. It is just a spring after all and if you loose it you loose nothing fundamental. The trampoline still works! Sorry, but not in my book. If you lose this then you lose everything. The Old Testament becomes unreliable, the New Testament tells lies. Jesus was just a man, conceived like you and I by natural means, the child of a regular Mum and Dad. If we lose

the reliability of scripture, and we lose Jesus then what do we have? We don't even have good moral teaching because there could be lies in that too. NO, No, No - this is NOT something we can "live without"!



DEFENCE OF GOD & DOCTRINE

"I am far more interested in jumping than I am in arguing about whose trampoline is better. You rarely defend those you love. You enjoy them and tell others about them and invite others to enjoy them with you.

Have you ever seen someone pull a photo out of their wallet and argue about the supremacy of this particular Loved one? Of course not. They show you the picture and give you the opportunity to see what they see." (Page 27 - Velvet Elvis)

I find this very interesting. "You rarely defend those you love" - Really? I will defend my wife and my kids as I'm sure we all would. If I showed a picture of my wife to someone my hope would be that they see what I see - I agree with Rob on that. I hope they would agree with me when I tell them all about her, about why I love her, why she is so special, how she was a virgin when I married her. But if they begin to discredit her or suggest that she wasn't a virgin for example I **WOULD DEFEND HER!** I would not just say "well that's your opinion" or "OK, well that's fine you go around telling everyone what you think is truth about her ... I know what is really true". Of course not, I would defend her, I would want to discuss, debate, look at evidence and defend her!

It may be true to say you "rarely defend those you love" when everyone agrees, but it is also true to say "you always defend those you love when they are under attack"? I wonder if this is why the Virgin Birth of Jesus does not seem to be a big deal to Bell?

USE OF SCRIPTURE

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

There were times, and I humbly accept that we can all inadvertently use scripture, when I felt Bell misused or misquoted scripture to make a point. On page 44 Bell is discussing the passage that says a woman should submit to her husband (not saying what verse he is referring to exactly as there are several) and does so by stating that **1 Cor 7:4** says that wives have authority over their husband! That is a convenient misquote at the very best as the passage is addressing the specific matter of a husband and wife not having sex together. What the verse actually says is “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does”. Slightly different I would say- To have authority over his body in relation to having “Conjugal Rights” (1 Cor 7:3) and being in complete authority over him. In fact the NIV says that he “yields” to his wife. All the versions I looked in, which was a lot, I did not find one that was not referencing the husbands body rather than the wife being in authority over him completely. Now I am not going to get drawn into a debate on the exegesis on this verse now, and I am not taking issue over Rob’s position on this point. What I am taking issue with is a sloppy use of scripture at best, and deliberate misquotation at worst.

“This truth about interpreting the Bible extends all the way to the simple reading of it in English. If we don’t read the Bible in its original Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic, then we are reading someone’s interpretation of the Bible. Just the work of translating requires the translator to make decisions about what the Bible says. Certain English words do not have an exact Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent, leaving the translator with a challenge of how to best represent the text using English words”. (Velvet Elvis - Pg 56)

This is Bell’s own statement about “interpreting the bible” or Hermeneutics, and I agree with him. In essence we start from the original text, it is interpreted initially by the translators and then a little by us as we read it. Usually we are “contextualising” what we read having interpreted it ourselves with the help of the translators. That is why it is helpful to look at many different translations as I did with the verse above to see if there is a bias, or misinterpretation by the translator. Also chapters and verses were only introduced to our bibles around **A.D. 1227** so another good hermetical practice is to read the verses around it too which in this case show that the issue at hand is sex within marriage, not a wife being in authority rather than in submission.

1 Corinthians 7:1-5 ESV *1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” 2 But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

Essentially Bell is misquoting an unrelated passage out of context to prove his point in a different context. Hmmm!

Interestingly Bell goes on to “interpret” the bible for us on Page 64 as follows:

“The first three miracles in the book of John are directly related to the three major gods of Asia Minor, the region John writes his gospel to. Dionysus the god who turned water into wine, Asclepius was the god of healing, and Demeter was the goddess of bread. So how does John begin his story? With Jesus turning water into wine, healing, and then feeding thousands of people. John has an agenda. He wants these people in this place and this time to that Jesus is better than their gods.” (Velvet Elvis - Pg 54)

A statement like “are directly related” suggest interpretation. There is nothing in the text to allow one to make a “direct” correlation between the things Bell is suggesting. Not convinced?

“When Paul writes to Timothy about women being saved in childbirth, he is making a direct reference to the goddess Artemis, whose temple was just down the street in Timothy’s hometown of Ephesus. Artemis’s followers believed that Artemis saved women from dying in childbirth, which is significant in a city where one out of two women died giving birth. Paul’s statement here has huge political, social and religious implications. He is implying that Artemis is a fraud” (Velvet Elvis - Pg 54-55)

At best Bell can say “He MAYBE making a direct reference to”, or “He MAYBE implying” but he is not. He is making absolute statements as statements of facts which they are not! They are supposition, conjecture and his interpretation of the text, which seems to be in opposition to his caution about relying on “interpretations” of biblical text.

Hermeneutics

As I already explained hermeneutics is the process of interpreting the bible. Whilst there are many process, methods and styles there are a few fundamentals. When I was at bible college we were taught that we can not interpret a word in the bible with a 21st century understanding of an English equivalent word. Let me give you an example:

1Th 1:5 “because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”.

Now the original word for POWER used here is “Dunamis” for which Strong’s Greek Lexicon give the following definition:

G1411

dunamis

doo'-nam-is

From G1410; force (literally or figuratively); specifically miraculous power (usually by implication a miracle itself): - ability, abundance, meaning, might (-ily, -y, -y deed), (worker of) miracle (-s), power, strength, violence, mighty (wonderful) work.

Now interestingly “Dunamis” is the word that we get our English word “Dynamite” from. Now a BAD hermeneutic would be to interpret the word “Power” or “Dunamis” in the **1 Th**

1:5 passage as meaning dynamite such “because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in **EXPLOSIVE POWER** and in the Holy Spirit“. The reason it is bad was that this would NEVER have been in the mind of the writer because gunpowder was not invented for another 750 years or so.

I tell you this because Bell makes this schoolboy error on page 82.

In the first line of his gospel, John calls Jesus the “Word”. The word Word here in Greek is the word logos, which is where we get the English word logic.

Logic, intelligence, design. The blueprint of creation.

When we speak Of these concepts, what we are describing the way the world is arranged. There is some sort of order under the chaos, and some people seem to have a better handle on it than others. Some understand math, some the human psyche, and others can speak clearly and compellingly about the solar system. When we say someone is intelligent, we are saying they have insight as to how things are put together. (Velvet Elvis - Pg 82)

The definition of the word “Logos” is this ...

G3056

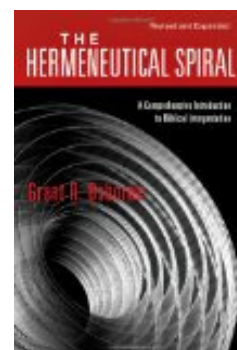
logos

log'-os

From G3004; something said (including the thought); by implication a topic (subject of discourse), also reasoning (the mental faculty) or motive; by extension a computation; specifically (with the article in John) the Divine Expression (that is, Christ): - account, cause, communication, X concerning, doctrine, fame, X have to do, intent, matter, mouth, preaching, question, reason, + reckon, remove, say (-ing), shew, X speaker, speech, talk, thing, + none of these things move me, tidings, treatise, utterance, word, work.

Even in the longer definitions of this Greek word do we find the word “Logic”. Simply because we derive a word from “Logos” can we apply our understanding of the word today an place it in the mind of the author 2000 years earlier. You just cant!

(If you are interested a great book on Hermeneutics is a book called “The Hermeneutical Spiral” by Grant R. Osbourne)



ARE ALL GODS THE SAME AS “YAHWEH?”

I struggled a bit to be honest with the section called “Everywhere” (Velvet Elvis page 75). He was talking about officiating a some kind of humanistic, nature affirming and organic wedding. The couples request to him was “*Make it really profound, deep and spiritual*” (Velvet Elvis page 76) having already told him “*They didn’t want Jesus, God or the Bible*” (Velvet Elvis page 76). Bell does it and when questioning them about why out in nature in a beautiful setting their response was one about a natural life force that “*Something holds all this together*” some kind of glue. “*They then said they would call this glue, this force, God*” (Velvet Elvis page 77)



Now don’t get me wrong, I think opening a dialogue with people who believe things different to us is vital! But we have to be sure that we are not simply allowing them to use the word “god” which is something different to our “God”. The Old Testament uses the word “Lord” for God a lot. But if you look closely it is always in CAPITALS where the “ORD” is smaller than the “L”. That is because in the original text uses the name of God - Yahweh but the Jews believed the name was so holy that they could not say it, so the

translators use the big capital “L” and small capital “ORD” to denote the word Yahweh.

I’m saying that because as bell rightly points out in his passage on interpreting the bible (Velvet Elvis Pg 56) which we have just discussed there is not always a good translation into English for the original words used in the bible. We use the word GOD for all sorts of things, few of which mean Yahweh. The gods of other religions are all gods, but they are not Yahweh.

1 Corinthians 8:5-6 ESV 5 For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

So it seems that this couple may well have been happy to call “*this glue, this force, God*” but that does not necessarily equate to the “one God”, the father of the “one Lord, Jesus Christ”!

Now, I am not getting on my high horse here. I accept that Bell may well have been looking to bring their thinking into line, to upgrade their understanding much as Paul did in Athens when he explained who their “Unknown God” was ([Acts 17:21-31](#)). My point is that there is a difference in explaining who Yahweh is to someone who has observed him and does not know who his is and someone who has a different God. All the gods are not the same ([1 Cor 8:5-6](#))!

This couple may have been confused and I’m prepared to accept that but they may well have been **Pantheists** believing that all the stars, galaxies, planets, mountains, wind, and rain, are all one and the same... part of what God is. So, they might say that all is God or in their case “*the glue*”.

As I say when I started this section ... I struggled with it.



CONFUSING WISDOM WITH TRUTH

On page 80 of Velvet Elvis he tells the story of a visit to Turkey where he noticed that there were yeast numbers of houses in various stages of being unfinished! When he enquired he was told that the Muslim faith did not allow them to be in debt so the builders built with what they had and when the money ran out they stopped. They would then restart again when they had more money. So when, and I assume if, the house was finished they would have a house and be debt free. Given the

western debt and the Muslim aversion to it Bell affirms it as truth.

Bells point is that “All Truth is God’s Truth” arguing what other kind of truth could there be. So says that when we see truth we can and should claim and affirm it.

First of all on the example he gave I think this is wisdom not absolute truth. It seems a strange example to use anyway considering Jesus spoke into this very specific issue asking the crowds that followed him a question.

Luke 14:28-30 ESV For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

Jesus may be indicating that the process of the Turks is not the best of approaches. Still Bell’s point is this:

“SO as a Christian, I am free to claim the good, the true, the holy, wherever and whenever I find it. I live with the understanding that truth is bigger than any religion and the world is God’s and everything in it” (Velvet Elvis Pg 80)

Now I would say that the key point here is that “As a Christian, I am free” to claim truth wherever I find it. If Bell is right and the houses in Turkey is “truth” then they have the truth, but it does not help them.

The acclaimed Christian author and pastor John Piper says this:

All truth exists to make God known and loved and shown. If it does not have those three effects it is not known rightly and should not be celebrated as a virtue. (Desiring God Web Site)

So I can agree with Bells statement if its conclusion is that “as a Christian, I am free to claim the good, the true, the holy, wherever and whenever I find it” Providing it leads me to know God more, love God more and to make him known(shown). It can not be simply sufficient to acknowledge it as truth! God is truth after all! (John 14:6)

Ill leave Dr Piper to summarise:

Alongside “All truth is God’s truth,” we need to say, “All truth exists to display more of God and awaken more love for God.” This means that knowing truth and knowing it as God’s truth is not a virtue until it awakens desire and delight in us for the God of truth. And that desire and delight are not complete until they give rise to words or actions that display the worth of God. That is, we exist to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31), and merely knowing a truth to be God’s truth does not glorify him any more than the devil does. (Desiring God Web Site)

PROMOTING FAITH IN SELF OVER FAITH IN JESUS

To be honest I was, and still am, totally confused over where Rob thinks he is going with his interpretation of the story of Jesus walking on the water and calling Peter out to join him. Bell holds that when Peter began to walk on the water began to sink it was because he doubted himself. Again, because of Bell's huge reliance on Rabbinical teaching he suggests that as a disciple of any Rabbi that when they do something the disciple would immediately want to do the same, hence Peter's desire to walk on the water in the first place.



“And Jesus says, “YOU Of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Who does Peter lose faith in?

Not Jesus; Jesus 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 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. He even says to them at one point, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” The entire rabbinical system was based on the rabbi having faith in his disciples”. (Velvet Elvis - Page 133-134)

It was when Peter took his attention off Jesus and focused on the wind that he became afraid and started to sink. His focus, and his faith, moved from Jesus and the supernatural to the wind and the natural and he sank. His faith in Jesus power to sustain him supernaturally was lost, overcome by doubt. At no point do we read Peter being his usual arrogant self assured self, but starts by confirming that it is in fact Jesus on the water before he steps out. This was not faith in self! He steps out because he recognised him as more than just a Rabbi which is clear when they return to the boat as everyone worshipped Jesus as the Son of God!

30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Mt 14:29-33)

Frankly I can see nothing to support this claim that Peter's faith was in himself, or should have been. In fact lets condiser this verse:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

That is the crux of it, Jesus own words ... "Apart from me you can do nothing". I can't see how faith in self can possibly fit in that at all!

For me the following Video explains this particular point really well

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wSAEezBc3s>

CREATION WAS NOT PERFECT ONLY GOOD!

I did struggle with Bell's interpretation of the creation. He concluded on page 158 of Velvet Elvis that the garden of Eden was not perfect when God made it. He suggests that the word "good" does not mean perfect. To my thinking, if we plod through that statement logically he is saying that the garden of Eden, that God created, was Good, but not perfect. So "not perfect" implies "has defects" so God created something, with defects which he then calls good! Hmmm ... not sure that would sit well with me. I mean God is not opposed to saying something is "Not Good" if that is the case *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"* (Gen 2:18).

Bell's point is that he believes that we all believe that perfect means "Static, fixed or unchanging". Of the online dictionaries I checked not one of them gave any definition that even uses those words! They defined the words as "beyond practical or theoretical improvement, without fault" which is what I think of as the meaning of perfect as it did to all the people I asked! (I looked at a handful of the 56 on-line dictionaries [here](#) - If you find one, just one that agreed with the generalisation used in Velvet Elvis please let me know)

"Not only are we connected with creation, but creation is going to move forward. It can't help it. It is loaded with energy. It's going to grow and produce and change and morph. This point is central to the story: The garden of Eden is not perfect.(Endnote 144). Nowhere in Genesis does it say it is perfect. The word the Bible uses is good. There is a difference. When we say "perfect", what we generally mean is "static" or "fixed" or "unchanging". It has reached a state in which there is going to be no more change. But this is not what Genesis says about the garden of Eden. Good means changing and growing and advancing and producing new things. And so these people are placed in the midst of this dynamic, changing, alive, vibrant environment and charged with the divine responsibility of doing something with it. Creating, arranging, ordering, caring for – doing something with it". (Velvet Elvis Pg 158)

ENDNOTE 144: *A writer who has helped me understanding this difference between good and perfect, and more important, between Greek and Hebrew thought, is Thorleif Boman. His book Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek (New York:Norton, 2002) has been very helpful. Brian McLaren also writes about this in The Story We Find Ourselves in (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003). I love his explanation of the Genesis account of creation. Or should i say Neo's? (Velvet Elvis Pg 192)*

With the exception of the definition of perfect I generally agree with Bell, but I don't think that God is unable to create something that is perfect and still capable of growth and production. He created man and woman after all and they were capable of reproduction and one would have assumed that had they not sinned they would have produced babies (and how often do we see a new born baby and say "He/She is perfect"), but in their case the babies would have also been perfect, yet we assume too that they would have grown and matured. If that thinking is too hypothetical for you how about Jesus himself. He arrived as a baby in this world and was perfect! Fully man yet without sin. As a perfect baby he did not remain static, fixed or unchanging! He "morphed" as Bell puts it, he grew physically, his knowledge increased as did his favour with God and man ([Luke 2:52](#)). Interestingly Bell later states that Christ was perfect (See section on Self Contradictions).

So I totally disagree with Bells position on what perfect means as I do with the notion that the creation, which God also said was good was less than perfect!

Interestingly I can find out nothing at all about the author *Thorleif Boman* Bell talks about here so if anyone can give me some links about him that would be really helpful. Brian McLaren on the other hand is known to me and those thoughts will have to be for a blog on another day.

WHAT CAUSED THE EARTH TO DECAY AND GO OFF BALANCE?

"God has given us power and potential and ability. God has given this power to us so we will use it well. We have choices about how we are going to use our power. The choices of the first people were so toxic because they were placed in the middle of a complex web of interaction and relationships with the world God had made. When they sinned, their actions threw off the balance of everything. Weather, Trees, Oceans." (Velvet Elvis - Pg 159)

Being as generous as I can I can say that this is true(ish), but misleading. The world began to decay because of the curse of God on it which I agree was a consequence of Man's sin, but it did not happen directly because of their sin, it was because of God's curse on it. The clue is in the first word that God spoke to Adam - "BECAUSE".

17 And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

(Gen 3:17-19).

One must conclude that if God had not cursed creation then none of the above would have happened, otherwise there was no need for God to have said it. The curse was God's response to the actions of Man, it was not a pre-programmed response of creation to the sin of Man. In fact later on in Genesis God declares that *"I will never again curse the ground because of man"* (Gen 8:21). In the New Testament Paul says *"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it"* (Rom 8:20) God's curse caused the decay of the planet and all of creation. Its that straight forward.

The danger here is that the "Power, Potential and Ability" that Bell indicates we have been given that when used badly resulted in the decay of the planet, might lead one to believe that the same "Power, Potential and Ability" might be used for good and thus restore the planet! I don't think from what Bell has written elsewhere that he believes this, but it is in my view teetering on the edge of suggesting that. The reality is that Jesus came to restore all things to God, including creation, and that is only possible by God lifting the curse, and creating a new heaven and a new earth. (see Romans 8:20-25)

POOR EVIDENCE OR SUPPORT

I found at times Bell making sweeping statements or unreasonable use of words like "Always" or "Never". He frequently made logical leaps that pragmatically seem to follow, do not stack up theologically or hermeneutically as I have shown. There are times when Bell seems to offer less than convincing evidence to support his sweeping statements either. A great example is on page 164 of Velvet Elvis.

"Everybody's god in the first century had risen from the dead" (See EndNote 160) (Velvet Elvis Pg 164)

Now when I read it I had no evidence to argue so thought this was an interesting point of history and was keen to look at the EndNote to start looking at the evidence. After all, you would assume if "Everybody's god had risen from the dead" then there would be a multitude of examples because ALL religions would be covered by everyone after all!

"EndNote 160: For an example of this, find a book on Greek mythology and look up Dionysus, also called Bacchus" (Velvet Elvis Pg194).

One example is hardly a valid support of "Everybody's god"! Now I am not saying is point is therefore invalid, just that a single example is not convincing evidence to support a claim that every religion in the 1st century had risen from the dead! The problem I have with this, and similar quotes is the use of words like "Everybody" in this case, but can easily be applied to words like "Only", "Always" and "Never too" in that one only needs to find once case where that is not true and you show the statement to be entirely false. So all I need to do in this case is find a single 1st century religion where the god did not rise from the dead and Bell's statement is proved false.

Now I'm sure that Bell was not intending to make a statement of absolute fact and certainty here. He was not, I would think, trying to make the point that there were no religions at that time that did not have a risen God. I suspect his point was that a risen Jesus may not have been entirely off the cultures radar at the time. My point and suggestion, is that one is careful with language and that Bell's researchers take a few minutes more to put some other

examples in the end note to give just a little more credence to his point. I found another 8 examples with very little effort which, if included in the EndNote would have strengthened his point no end. I think too he could have made his point a little clearer too.

SELF CONTRADICTIONS

There were times when I think Bell ties himself up with his own sweeping statements. Take the point we have already discussed regarding creation and Bells statement about what perfect means. He believes that perfect means “Static, fixed or unchanging” and he believes that we all believe that too. This gives rise to his argument that the earth and creation was not perfect because it not ”Static, fixed or unchanging” yet on page 141 of Velvet Elvis he states that “Christ is Perfect” and uses [Heb 2:10](#) & [Heb 5:9](#) to support his statement (all true) but if he believes that if something is perfect it is ”Static, fixed or unchanging” then surely he does not believe this of Jesus does he? I have already stated that Jesus came as a baby, grew and matured. His knowledge increased as did his favour with God and man ([Luke 2:52](#)) and so in no way was ”Static, fixed or unchanging”. Jesus was perfect as a baby as he was as a man, but grew from one to the other!

The point here is that Bell’s assumption of what perfect is, is contradicted by his statement that Jesus was perfect, which he was, but that then shows the error of his position on the meaning of perfect.

CONCLUSION

Overall I found the theological errors too huge, the hermeneutic interpretation flawed and the assumptions too big to be able to recommend this book. I would not go so far as to say one should not read it because, as I have said, there is some great points in it too. His section on “Who we are now” on page 139-147 for example is really good, the best bit of the book I would say, but for me there is much that I consider dangerous and for that reason I would rather point people to something else.

I am all for contextualising the teaching of the bible, for making it accessible to everyone, for presenting it all a modern, cool and hip way and even for allowing some things to be disagreed over but we must not remove the things that are the immovable core. These things that are held in our “Closed Hand” we need to fight for, such as the virgin birth, because if, as Bell suggest, they become unimportant we loose everything!

I want a “Come as you are” culture in our church, but I will not remove the fundamentals of the Christian faith to get them to do that. I want to accept everyone as they are, but love them enough as Jesus did not to leave them there. I want to show them Jesus and start them on a journey with him. He will ultimately guide them through the things that initially they might find impossible to get their heads round (Like the virgin birth). I won’t rush them in to accepting everything on day one, but for them to come to faith they will have to get there, but when and how is for the Holy Spirit to determine.
