

Book Review
Velvet Elvis:
Repainting the Christian Faith
By Ron Bell (2005)
Zondervan

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Rob Bell, author of *Velvet Elvis*, celebrates and affirms the many Christians satisfied with the current “painting” of the Christian faith—the churches, the books, the music, the language, the beliefs. However, *Velvet Elvis* is not intended for these people. Bell has written *Velvet Elvis* for those who need a fresh perspective on Jesus and what it means to live the life that Jesus teaches. This is a large demographic. Not only are younger adults less likely to identify with a religious group but increasingly older millennials are also saying their religion is nothing in particular. These people have been categorized as “Nones” (Lipka, 2015). *Velvet Elvis* speaks to this disinterested group and is especially helpful (possibly life changing) to those longing for a new perspective on the Christian faith.

Though not Bell’s intended audience, those satisfied with the present portrayal of Jesus should also find *Velvet Elvis* interesting and useful. The book provides insight into the reasons many are unsatisfied with the current rendering of the Christian faith. It is wise for professors, serving as mentors and advisers to college students, to be able to sympathize with students that may be searching for and are receptive to a new understanding of Jesus. Professors may want to recommend *Velvet Elvis* to their students and be able to discuss Bell’s book with them.

According to Bell, every generation needs to ask the challenging questions of what it means to be a Christian here and now, in this place, at this time. These questions are proper, normal, and have been asked for centuries. An historical case in point is Martin Luther who not only asked many questions regarding the Christian faith and how the church was being presented to the world but also altered the beliefs of many Christians. This

reformation process was not an isolated occurrence, but was intended to continue over and over again. For this reason contemporaries of Luther, rather than using the word *reformed*, used the word *reforming* to describe this continuing and necessary process of change and growth.

According to Bell, “Repainting” the Christian faith is proper, and we all are part of it and we all interpret the Bible based on our preconceived experiences. No one is objective and everyone’s interpretation is essentially one’s opinion. Bell offers several examples of how various passages of the Bible are interpreted differently as well as passages that have been reinterpreted over the years (role of women, slavery, head coverings, etc.). Of course we think our opinions and interpretations are the most correct; otherwise we would change our opinion.

Bell contends that questions, especially those that are shocking, blasphemous, arrogant, and raw, are evidence of a humility that admits we are not God. Even some of Jesus’ last words questioned God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Questioning is liberating, freeing us from having to have it all figured out. In fact Bell postulates that God appreciates those that do not mindlessly accept everything about Jesus presented to them.

A poignant example that Bell writes about is a Doubt Night at Mars Hill (Bell’s former church). People were encouraged to write down questions and share doubts that they had about God and the Christian faith. Bell writes that he received page after page of doubts and questions that are personal, angry, desperate, deep, and philosophical. The topics include heaven, hell, suicide, Satan, God, love, and rape. Bell found that most important to the people were not the

questions, but simply the opportunity and affirmation that it was proper to voice what was deepest in their hearts. It was liberating and healthy to be allowed to not only express doubts but to have those doubts honored, appreciated, and understood.

There are seven “movements” (chapters) in *Velvet Elvis* with subdiscussions. One discussion entitled “Labels” in the movement titled “True” is especially relevant for *JBIB* readers. Bell writes that “Christian” is a great noun (the first followers of Jesus were called Christians) and a poor adjective. In fact, Bell argues that it is dangerous to label things “Christian,” which is commonly done to describe subjects as disparate as *Christian music*, *Christian movies*, *Christian businesses*, and *Christian politicians*. Labeling something Christian can lead to mindless acceptance, the assumption being that if it is *Christian* it is God edifying. Another danger is that one may be considered less of Christian if one disagrees with something labeled *Christian*. Bell encourages the reader to maintain one’s discernment, radar testing and probing everything, even (especially) if labeled Christian. Being Christian is to continually engage the mind and heart, not shutting them off and letting someone else do the thinking.

Bell insists that it impossible to have a secular job. If one follows Jesus, that person’s work is sacred. God is there. The objective is not to bring our work into the church; the goal is for the church to be within each individual, transforming the places we live, work and play. If someone is an actor, the goal is not to perform in church but to go into the world and act really well, giving it one’s all.

Velvet Elvis offers encouragement to those who feel disenchanting with or marginalized by the present painting of Jesus and the Christian faith. The book is also helpful for those seeking to understand the reasons why so many feel disenfranchised by the current portrayal of Jesus. The book is perfectly suited for a college course such as a seminar.

REFERENCE

- Lipka, M. (2015, May 12) . Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'nones'. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>