

Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show  
a review of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*

Review by:

Mark Edward Sohmer  
mark@sohmer.net  
<http://mark.sohmer.net>

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The latest version of this document can be found at: [http://www.sohmer.net/Velvet\\_Elvis.pdf](http://www.sohmer.net/Velvet_Elvis.pdf)

This review of *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* is based on the soft cover edition, printed in 2005. All page references are to that edition.

All scripture references not taken from *Velvet Elvis* are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

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## Introduction - What's With all the Elvis Talk?:

When I first heard of the book *Velvet Elvis*, I thought, “What a funny name,” but then didn’t think much more. That was until teens in the Sunday School class I teach began quoting and recommending it.

And chances are good that members of your church will begin quoting and recommending this book too, as it has sold over 100,000 copies in its first year of printing, and in 2007, *The Church Report* rated Rob Bell the tenth most influential Christian in America<sup>1</sup>.

So what’s with all the *Elvis* talk?

The full title of Rob’s book is, *Velvet Elvis; Repainting the Christian Faith*.

In the introduction to the book, Rob talks about a velvet painting of Elvis Presley that he owns. “Velvet Elvis” paintings are not at all uncommon. Rob makes the case that just as it would be absurd for one of the scores of artists who have painted a “Velvet Elvis” over the years to think that they captured the perfect representation of the King of Rock and Roll, so too is it wrong for Christians to think we can fully understand the Christian faith. Each generation, Rob argues, must re-interpret and grow the “faith tradition,” and, according to him, this is an endless process.



Rob wrote:

“The Christian faith tradition is filled with change and growth and transformation. Jesus took part in this process by calling people to rethink faith and the Bible and hope and love and everything else, and by inviting them into the endless process of working out how to live as God created us to live” (p. 11).

Rob invites his readers into his “Velvet Elvis,” his understanding and interpretation of the Christian faith, and to join in the line of many who have gone before us re-interpreting the Christian faith for their generation.

Rob says:

“I’m part of a community, a movement of people who have been living, exploring, discussing, sharing, and experiencing new understandings of Christian faith” (p.14).

Rob Bell teaches that the church needs “new understandings of Christian faith.” Rob teaches that doctrines that have been understood to be true for 2,000 years must be re-examined and re-interpreted for today. Rob teaches that faith is like a “Velvet Elvis” painting, and just as no painter could possibly represent the “King of Rock and Roll” with complete accuracy in oil and canvas, so too can no Christian fully understand the “King of Kings” accurately with only the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thechurchreport.com/mag\\_article.php?mid=875&mname=January](http://www.thechurchreport.com/mag_article.php?mid=875&mname=January)

The purpose of this review is to offer a different perspective, contrary to Rob's. Rob believes faith is like a "Velvet Elvis," always changing and improving as different artists add their own understanding and point of views. I propose that faith is not like that. Faith is like "Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show." Please let me explain.

On September 9, 1956, a historic event took place. A young performer from Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis Aaron Presley, made his debut on CBS' iconic *Ed Sullivan Show*. Don't believe me? This historical event can be verified a number of ways, including speaking with eye witnesses, those who saw it on television, and at the time of this writing you can even download the episode from amazon.com for \$2.99!

Elvis Presley did perform on the Ed Sullivan show, and we can all watch archive footage to see for ourselves.

The true Christian faith is not like a "Velvet Elvis" painting that different artists interpret anew over time, but true Christian faith is like "Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show." The critical missing piece to Rob's view of God is that God Himself gave us a divine revelation. This divine revelation is perfect and immutable (does not change), therefore, if we want to know about true faith, we can go back to the archive, so to speak. We can open up God's divine revelation to us. There is no need to re-interpret to come to a *new* understanding. What we need is to open the Bible and grasp the *old* understanding. In fact, to neglect to do so is insulting to the Author who gave us Scripture so that we would know with certainty what the true Christian faith is. True faith is not like a bunch of artists each adding their own unique take on a painting. It is a divine revelation, given to us from God. We can and must read God's Word to know what is true.

### Questioning the Doctrine. Not Attacking the Man:

I want to say from the outset that I am in no way attacking Rob Bell personally. I have never met Rob, but I'm sure he's fun to be around. He's a superb writer and storyteller for sure, and the fact that he is an articulate and gifted communicator is obvious.

Please understand that the purpose of this review is not to poke "cheap shots" at Rob as a person.

Rob has written a book that has had tremendous influence on many in the church today, and he has made theological claims that must be answered. That is the purpose of this review - to question what Rob has stated. In fact, Rob invites just this!

On the back cover of *Velvet Elvis*, Rob wrote:

"We have to test everything... Test it. Probe it. Do that to this book" (*Velvet Elvis*, back cover).

If you're reading this and you're a Rob Bell fan, please understand that I mean no disrespect to Rob as a person. By no means! But as Christians, we have the responsibility and mandate to test claims about God to see if these claims are true.

Acts 17:11 tells the story of Christians in Berea. It says, "these [Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received [Paul's] word with all readiness of mind, and *searched the scriptures daily*, whether those things were so" (emphasis mine). Please note that these Bereans heard the Apostle Paul, and then "searched the scriptures daily." Why? They wanted to know if what Paul had been teaching them was true or not. And these Bereans were applauded for testing Paul's teachings against the Bible.

Certainly if the Apostle Paul could be tested against Scripture without it being considered a personal attack against Paul, then we can test Rob's teaching against Scripture, and have it not be considered a personal attack against Rob.

The purpose of this essay is to consider what Rob teaches, and place it under the testing authority of the Bible. If Rob's teachings are true, then we should all read his books and consider him a man of God! If his teachings do not line up with Scripture, then we must choose to believe the Scriptures over the teachings of any man.

## The Errors of *Velvet Elvis*:

I had a number of people recommend *Velvet Elvis* to me, and interestingly, they all said basically the same thing. "You might not agree with *everything* Bell has to say, but there's a lot of good stuff in there." Each separate individual who recommended this book all gave a similar disclaimer, that there would be *some things* I wouldn't agree with.

Because of this, I figured that when I read the book, I would likely agree with maybe 80% of what was written, and find 20% objectionable. But when I started to actually read the book, I found that my guess was grossly inaccurate.

To the contrary, I found myself underlining objectionable content on almost every page! I was shocked by the many errors of *Velvet Elvis*. This book was hardly 80% truth and 20% questionable. Page after page I found major heresies, aberrant theology, and in some cases bizarre conclusions based on very flimsy Biblical interpretation.

I have categorized the errors of *Velvet Elvis* as follows:

- Heretical Errors:
  - Wrong View of the Trinity
  - Wrong View of the Exclusivity of Christianity
  - Wrong View of the State of Mankind
  - Wrong Gospel
- Aberrant Theology:
  - Wrong View of Jesus' Purpose
  - Wrong View of Heaven and Hell
  - Wrong View of Rabbinic Judaism
  - Wrong Hermeneutics
  - Wrong Influences
- Bad Conclusions:
  - You Don't Have to Defend Doctrine
  - You Should Not Preach the Gospel with Words

These errors are hardly minor, and they should concern us greatly. Considering the profound influence Rob has been enjoying lately, especially among younger Christians, the fact that he misrepresents the Trinity, the gospel, and our Christian mission is no small matter.

It's one thing for me to claim that Rob has made these errors, and it an entirely different thing for me to prove it. That is the purpose of this review - to show in Rob's own words that he consistently misrepresents the authentic Christian faith in his book, *Velvet Elvis*.

## How the Errors Happened:

The errors that Rob teaches in *Velvet Elvis* are quite serious, and before we look at Rob's errors, it would be useful to discuss *how* Rob came to these bad conclusions. This discussion will also warn and equip us from making the same mistakes Rob has made.

The root of Rob's errors can all be traced back to two false views:

1. A low view of Scripture.
2. An erroneous view of the nature of truth.

Let's look at each of these one at a time.

### Low View of Scripture:

One of the hallmarks of being a true Christian is a high view of the Word of God. The fact that the Creator has spoken to man is the very basis for knowing anything.

The world looks at Christians and thinks we are arrogant because we claim to know God, and the world would be correct, except for the fact that God spoke.

Consider the Bible. Many times it claims to be the Word of God with statements such as "Thus saith the LORD," "The word of the LORD," et cetera.

Perhaps the greatest passage on the value of Scripture is in Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16 & 17. "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

King David was said to be a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), and David declared, "I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold" (Psalm 119:127).

In fact, the Bible even teaches that God has magnified His Word above His name (see Psalm 138:2)!

The Reformers understood the preeminent position of the Word of God and they summed it up with the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura*, which literally translates, "by Scripture alone." This echoes the sentiments of the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. *Sola Scriptura* means that as Christians, we only need the Bible to know God; we do not need any other source. Or said another way, we do not need the Bible plus church tradition, or the Bible plus Rabbinic interpretation, or the Bible plus the latest self-help book. The Bible teaches us that we ought to have such a high view of Scripture that we would consider it outrageous to think that we could find any meaningful answers about God, who we are, and what it means to be a Christian anywhere else.

Christians would indeed be very arrogant if it were not for divine revelation. You see, we tell the world that we "know" God, and this would be absurd - except that God has made Himself known to us.

It is because God initiated communication with human beings that we can know for sure about God, and furthermore, it is insulting to the Creator who spoke to claim that we *can't* know Him for certain.

Many heresies begin with a low view of Scripture, or a belief that we cannot know for certain what God has said. When this happens, a person's authority transfers from the Word of God to another source;

perhaps a charismatic leader, or to a different ancient text. When we have a high view of Scripture, however, and test all beliefs against the Word, then the Word acts as a filter to prevent us from wandering into heresy.

When reading through *Velvet Elvis*, it becomes clear that Rob has unfortunately adopted a low view of Scripture, even putting doubt into the reader's mind that we can understand for certain what God has said. Rob wrote:

“The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not” (p. 32).

Please notice what Rob is saying here. He calls the faith “mysterious” and says it “can't be put into words.” This is wrong because God has given us a divine revelation using words.

The Apostle Paul often said phrases like “I would not have you ignorant” when speaking about the great truths about God. The Bible makes the audacious claim that we can and must understand God, and the reason is not because we're so smart (because we're not), but because God has explained Himself to us.

Yet Rob teaches that we cannot know God's truths for certain.

“This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that ‘Scripture alone’ is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God's Word, in the same breath I have to affirm the when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true” (pp. 67-68).

Please note that Rob calls “Scripture alone” a “problem.” He says, “When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.” He also makes the claim that the Bible we have is only so because a group of people voted a certain way, as if it could have played out that had the vote happened on a different day, maybe there'd be no book of Matthew, and the *Didache* would be considered canon. Rob demonstrates a very low view of the sovereignty of God and a high view of the power of man, two errors that continually show up throughout his book. The truth is that the present books of the Bible are the right ones because God made it so, not because of a vote by a group of men. Yet Rob teaches that the Bible contains its present books because a group of men said so, and as a result of his God-removed man-centered view of the establishment of the canon of Scripture, he rejects *Sola Scriptura*.

In *Velvet Elvis*, Rob tells the story of a female leader in his church who told him that she had been studying the Bible recently to try to find out what God teaches about a certain matter. In response to this woman, Rob said:

“Now please understand that this way of thinking is prevalent in a lot of Christian churches... But this view of the Bible is warped and toxic, to say the least. The assumption is that there is a way to read the Bible that is agenda- and perspective-free. As if all these other people have their opinion and biases, but some are able to just read it for what it says” (pp. 53-54).

Rob says that it is “warped and toxic” to think that we can understand the original intent of the Bible. Rob believes that we always see Scripture through the lens of our “opinion and biases.” To be fair, very



often people do fall prey to the trap of interpreting the Bible incorrectly, but that doesn't mean that we always do that. This is why godly men spend years studying the original languages, the culture, and the history of the Bible, so that they can properly understand the Biblical passages. The science of understanding the literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of a passage is called hermeneutics, and it really is not too complicated. In fact, we are commanded to do just that. The Bible commands us to "study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Sure, it may be hard work to study the Scriptures and to rightly divide the Word, but it is possible, and we are expected to do it.

Rob assumes that we are not able to separate our biases from our interpretations, but Jesus expected just the opposite of us. When debating the Sadducees about the resurrection, Jesus said to them, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures" (Matthew 22:29). Jesus didn't say, "Oh, you misinterpreted the Bible because of your bias." No. Jesus *expected* his listeners to not only have studied the Scriptures, but also to have understood them, despite their biases. And Jesus expects this of us as well.

Rob further reveals his low view of Scripture in the following passage:

"If there is a divine being who made everything, including us, what would our experiences with this being look like? The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God. We are dealing with somebody we made up. And if we made him up, then we are in control. And so in passage after passage, we find God reminding people that he is beyond and bigger and more" (p. 25).

Rob would be right if it were not for divine revelation. It is because God spoke to us, because God communicated through the written Word, that we can and must know who He is. In one sense Rob is right when he says we can't have God "figured out" but he wrongly concludes that we can't sufficiently understand what the Scriptures teach.

For example, Rob says:

"It is possible to make the Bible say whatever we want it to, isn't it?" (p.44).

This statement reveals Rob's opinion of the Bible - that it is unreliable because we can twist it to say what we want. Where Rob mortally fails is that we cannot make the Scriptures say whatever we want when we use a proper and consistent hermeneutic. This quotation of Rob's only seeks to get the reader to have a lower view of Scripture; to trust it less.

"With God being so massive and awe-inspiring and full of truth, why is his book capable of so much confusion?" (p. 45).

The answer to this is that the Bible does not confuse true Christians. Jesus Himself promised that His Holy Spirit would guide Christians into the truth. "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). True Christians have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us, and the Holy Spirit illuminates the truth of the Scriptures so that we can understand what it is saying.

However, there definitely is a large group of people that the Bible confuses, and the Scriptures tell us why it is puzzling to some people. Paul told the Corinthian Christians the answer when he said, "But the natural man (non-Christian) receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: **neither can he know them**, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14, emphasis mine). Please note that the Bible is very clear when it teaches that God's Holy Spirit teaches true

Christians the essentials through the Word, but those who are not actually Christians are unable to understand the Bible. It is those people who experience “so much confusion” as Rob puts it.

All throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob makes statements that teach that studying the Bible with the intention of finding the actual meaning is a fruitless pursuit. Regarding “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Rob says:

“So even a verse as basic as this raises more questions than it answers” (p. 46).

Actually, “Love your neighbor as yourself” means precisely what it says. It really isn’t all that complicated, despite what Rob says. And lest we ask “who is our neighbor,” the Bible anticipates that question and answers it for us in Luke 10:30-37, the story of the “Good Samaritan.”

When we study the whole counsel of God’s Word in its proper context, we can know what it means with certainty, and as we saw with Jesus’ interactions with the Sadducees, we are required to know and required to understand the true meaning of Scriptures.

In stark contrast, Rob seeks to get people to trust the Word less, and cling to the “mysterious” and “unknowable” god of his. He wrote:

“We sponsored a Doubt Night at our church a while back. People were encouraged to write down whatever questions or doubts they had about God and Jesus and the Bible and faith and church... But what was so powerful for those I spoke with was that they were free to voice what was deepest in their hearts and minds. Questions, doubts, struggles. It wasn’t the information that helped them - it was simply being in an environment in which they were free to voice what was inside” (pp. 29-30).

The telling sentence in this paragraph is when Rob says, “It wasn’t the information that helped them.” We must ask, “Why not?” I concede that a “doubt night” sounds like a great idea for a church to sponsor, and so I give kudos to Rob for thinking that up, but where he failed was in neglecting to open up the Scriptures to give the answers. The value in a doubt night is not in the therapeutic freedom of finally expressing those repressed doubts, but the value comes in opening up the Word of God and finding the answers to those doubts.

No doubt Rob was reacting to oppressive churches that foster an environment where it’s taboo to ask questions or express doubts, and I join him in criticizing such unhealthy environments. But the answer is not to experience a man-centered feelings-oriented doubt session with no answers, but to open the Word of God and teach the proper response to doubts. Rob said, “It wasn’t the information that helped them - it was simply being in an environment in which they were free to voice what was inside.” Therein is his error and therein he exposes his low view of Scripture. A high view of Scripture would lead us to know that the only thing that could help these hurting people with their questions would be solid answers from the Bible. And the questions being asked (found on page 29) weren’t all that hard if you understand basic doctrine. But it requires a presupposition that the Bible has the answers, and that those answers are knowable. By Rob’s own writings, he demonstrates that he either does not believe that the Bible has answers or that those answers are knowable (or both.) In short, he has a low view of Scripture.

You see this when Rob recounts a story of when he wasn’t able to help a friend get through some difficult times. Rob wrote:

“Suffering is a place where clichés don’t work and words often fail. I was at lunch last week with a friend who is in the middle of some difficult days, and I don’t have any answers. I just don’t” (p. 170).

A person with a high view of the Scriptures must ask, “Why didn’t Rob have any answers for this man?” The Bible has the answers! One with a high view of the Scriptures believes that if we study the Scriptures then we can counsel anyone. Rob apparently doesn’t believe this, and tragically left his friend without any helpful counsel. In fact, Rob alludes here that any words from the Bible would have been a “cliché.” This is yet another example of where Rob demonstrates that he has a low view of the Word of God.

Pages 115 through 118 recount Rob’s struggles with not being able to be the “super pastor” he thought he ought to be. Rob concludes that he couldn’t achieve the high place he thought he ought to, and he had to let the idea of “super pastor” die.

I noticed in all of this writing on how he was “healed” he didn’t quote even one scripture or talk at all about how the Bible gave him the proper perspective. This is yet another example of his low view of Scripture and his high view of man’s wisdom. Rob wrote:

“Jesus wants to heal our souls, wants to give us the shalom of God. And so we have to stop. We have to slow down. We have to sit still and stare out the window and let the engine come to an idle. We have to listen to what our inner voice is saying” (p. 118).

Though I appreciated Rob’s honesty and transparency regarding his struggles being “super pastor,” I couldn’t help but be disturbed by his conclusion that we need to listen to our “inner voice.” If he had a high view of Scripture, he would never have concluded that he needed to listen to his inner voice, but he would have concluded that he needed to open the Bible and listen to the Word of God.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

In contrast, Rob routinely mocks those who believe the Bible for what it says. He wrote:

“Maybe that is who God is looking for - people who don’t just sit there and mindlessly accept whatever comes their way.” (p.30)

As Christians, we are to take Biblical truth by faith. This is not mindless.

The logical next step to having a low view of God is the belief that we can’t truly understand the Bible with certainty. Rob demonstrated that he has embraced this error when he wrote:

“The idea that everybody else approaches the Bible with baggage and agendas and lenses and I don’t is the ultimate in arrogance. To think that I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a ‘pure’ or ‘exact’ meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to a very destructive reading of the Bible that robs it of its life and energy” (p. 54).

Though it is true that it is possible to read one’s own culture and background into the text, many men spend years learning the original languages and studying the original cultures precisely so that they won’t read the Bible with their own lens superimposed on top of the text. With a proper hermeneutic, we allow the text to interpret itself, and we can understand the essentials without baggage and agendas and lenses.

Jesus expected this of the Sadducees. He expects this of us as well.

Rob has embraced the philosophy that the Bible is too mysterious to fully comprehend.

“One of the great ‘theologians’ of our time, Sean Penn, put it this way: ‘When everything gets answered, it’s fake. The mystery *is* the truth.’

The mystery *is* the truth” (p. 33).

Let’s pass over the fact that he takes Sean Penn seriously, “mystery” in the Bible is not defined as truths that are unknowable. On the contrary! If you lookup where the word “mystery” is used in the New Testament<sup>2</sup>, you will see that the word “mystery” refers to a doctrine that was *previously* unrevealed revelation, but **has now been revealed**. Rob embraces “mystery” without a Biblical understanding of what biblical “mystery” is.

Remember, Rob said:

“The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can’t be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not” (p. 32).

Yet the New Testament repeatedly tells us that we can (and must) know the mysteries of God. The following are but a sampling from where the word “mystery” is used in the new Testament. Jesus said, “Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). Please note that the Savior said that it was “given” or “appointed” for His disciples to “know” the mystery. Paul teaches a similar understanding of the word “mystery” in Romans 16:25-26 when he said, “the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest.” Please note the part about “now is made manifest.” Ephesians 1:9 says, “Having made known unto us the mystery of his will.” Again, as in all the verses cited above, the word “mystery” is a doctrine that has now been revealed. “Mystery” in the Bible is not at all like how Rob portrays it. In the Bible we are told that God has revealed the mysteries, yet Rob teaches that if you think you understand the mystery of God, it’s fake.

“When everything gets answered, it’s fake. The mystery *is* the truth” (p. 33).

Finally, Rob demonstrated his distrust for the Scriptures when he wrote:

“The people who eventually wrote all of this down [the Bible] weren’t sitting there with their hand and the pen moving as if controlled by some outside force.

The writers of the Bible had agendas” (p. 66).

When a man has a low view of Scripture, he ultimately is lead to doubt the supernatural verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. “Verbal, plenary inspiration” merely means that God supernaturally used the hands of men to write down each and every word He wanted to record in the Bible, right down to the smallest dot. Rob sadly rejects the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures when he wrote that the “people who eventually wrote all of this down [the Bible] weren’t sitting there with their hand and the pen moving as if controlled by some outside force.”

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:11, Romans 11:25; 16:25, 1 Corinthians 2:7; 15:51, Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 3:4; 5:32; 6:19, Colossians 1:26; 1:27; 2:2; 4:3, 2 Thessalonians 2:7, 1 Timothy 3:9; 3:16, Revelation 1:20; 10:7; 17:5; 17:7.

Actually, the Bible says that is exactly what happened! “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but **holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost**” (2 Peter 1:20-21, emphasis mine).

When a man has a low view of Scripture, this leads to:

- the transfer of authority from the Bible to another source, perhaps a charismatic leader, or a different ancient text (We will see this is exactly what has happened with Rob when we see how he uses the Rabbinical works of the *Talmud* and the *Mishna*)
- the belief that we can't know for certain what God has said
- the belief that God's Word is too mysterious to fully comprehend
- a distrust of the Bible, believing that it can be twisted to say whatever one wants it to be said
- the answers to life's problems are not to be found in the Holy Scriptures alone
- a denial of the supernatural verbal, plenary inspiration of each and every word of the Scriptures.

In contrast, when a man has a high view of Scripture, this leads to:

- all beliefs being tested against the Scriptures, the Scriptures acting as a filter to protect us from false teachings
- the belief that we can and must know with certainty what God has said
- knowing that what was previously a “mystery” has now been revealed in the Scriptures
- trust in the Word of God and excitement in studying the Word to properly understand what it says
- the belief that the Word of God has all the answers to life's problems, and we can find counsel in time of need therein
- the belief that every word in the Scriptures supernaturally came from God.

This review will outline many of the doctrinal errors found in Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*, but they all have their root in Rob's low view of the Scriptures. Jesus' words to the Sadducees are perfectly applicable to Bell. “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures” (Matthew 22:29).

### **Wrong View of Truth:**

All throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob portrays true Christianity as something dynamic, something that changes from generation to generation.

“The Christian faith tradition is filled with change and growth and transformation. Jesus took part in this process by calling people to rethink faith and the Bible and hope and love and everything else, and by inviting them into the endless process of working out how to live as God created us to live” (p. 11).

The Bible teaches just the opposite. The Bible teaches that true Christianity “was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). Please note the phrase “once delivered.” True biblical faith does not vary for each generation. Truth once delivered can not change. Yet Rob teaches that it does and has.

“And so these first Christians passed on the faith to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation until it got to... us. Here. Today. Those who follow Jesus and belong to his church. And now it is our turn. It is our turn to step up and take responsibility for who the church is going to be for a new generation. It is our turn to redefine and reshape and dream it all up again” (p. 164).

Rob teaches that each generation must “redefine and reshape and dream” Christianity anew. However, church doctrine is not re-shapeable. It is once delivered.

Consider how Rob understood the role of Martin Luther in Church history.

“There are endless examples of this ongoing process, so I’ll describe just one. Around 500 years ago, a man named Martin Luther raised a whole series of questions about the painting the church was presenting to the world... But that wasn’t the end of it. Luther was taking his place in a long line of people who never stopped rethinking and repainting the faith... Because of this movement, the churches he was speaking against went through their own process of rethinking and repainting, making significant changes as a result” (p. 11).

Rob’s statement about Luther is historically inaccurate. Luther did not “rethink” or “repaint” the faith, making it new for his generation. Quite the opposite! Luther pointed his generation **back** to the Bible, back to the original faith that was “once delivered” from which the church of his day had strayed.

In the introduction to this review, I mentioned that Rob sees Christianity like a “Velvet Elvis painting,” and that each artist who paints the “King of Rock and Roll” adds his own new interpretation and new perspective. I also mentioned that Christianity is not like that. If we must use “Elvis” as an illustration, then Christianity is like “Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show.” It is a historical event and if one wants to understand it better, one need only to look into the archive of CBS and watch the tape. That’s what Luther did. He went “back to the archive,” so to speak, by going back to the original faith delivered in the Scriptures. Luther did not add a new perspective to Christianity, and neither should we. We ought to do what Luther did, and that was to open up the Scriptures and point his generation back to the original faith that was “once delivered.”

In contrast, Rob exhorts us to add our own interpretation to Christianity:

“We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived, and explained” (p.12).

Rob uses the term “reforming” as if it means to come up with new ideas, but he’s wrong. That’s not what the word “reforming” means. “Reforming” means going back to the Bible.

“For many Christians, the current paintings are enough. The churches, the books, the language, the methods, the beliefs - there is nothing wrong with it. It works for them and meets their needs, and they gladly invite others to join them in it. I thank God for that. I celebrate those who have had their lives transformed in these settings.

But [Velvet Elvis] is for those who need a fresh take on Jesus and what it means to live the kind of life he teaches us to live. I’m part of a community, a movement of people who have been living, exploring, discussing, sharing, and experiencing new understandings of Christian faith” (p.14).

Rob’s error is this: we do not need “new understandings of Christian faith” but the old understanding.

And this leads us to Rob’s illustration of faith being like a trampoline. Chapter one of *Velvet Elvis* contrasts the difference between understanding faith like a brick wall versus like a trampoline.

To paraphrase, Rob makes the case that traditional Christians see faith like a sturdy wall, with each doctrine being one brick in the wall. “The virgin birth,” that’s a brick. “The sinlessness of Christ,” that’s

another brick. Each of these doctrines, each of these bricks, are rigid, inflexible, and traditional Christians stack them up in such a way that if one of them is removed, the whole wall crumbles.

Rob suggests that instead we ought to envision faith more like a trampoline. A trampoline is not held together by bricks, but by springs. With Rob's alternative, each doctrine is like a spring, and it can be stretched, bent, and even removed without affecting the overall effectiveness of the trampoline.

Now I would be willing to agree with Rob if we were talking about non-essential doctrines where legitimate brothers and sisters in Christ have liberty to differ, such as proper mode of baptism, the nature of sign gifts today, or other *non-essential* teachings where the Bible has not dogmatically decreed the truth. To my horror, Rob was willing to reconsider and even entertained removing vital doctrines such as the virgin birth and the divine nature of Christ! Please read the following long excerpt from *Velvet Elvis*:

“Someone recently gave me a videotape of a lecture given by a man who travels around speaking about the creation of the world. At one point in his lecture, he said if you deny the God created the world in six literal twenty-four-hour days, then you are denying that Jesus ever died on the cross. It's a bizarre leap of logic to make, I would say.

But he was serious.

It hit me while I was watching him that for him faith isn't a trampoline; it's a wall of bricks. Each of the core doctrines for him is like an individual brick that stacks on top of the others. If you pull one out, the whole wall starts to crumble. It appears quite strong and rigid, but if you begin to rethink or discuss even one brick, the whole thing is in danger. Like he said, no six-day creation equals no cross. Remove one and the whole thing wobbles.

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 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 the spring was seriously questioned?

Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian?

Is the way of Jesus still the best way to live?

Or does the whole thing fall apart?” (pp. 26-27).

Rob's analogy of the trampoline allows for essential doctrines of Christianity to be removed. If Jesus had an earthly father named Larry, then he would have had a sin nature. If Jesus had a sin nature, then He would not have been a sufficient sacrifice for our sins. If Jesus' father were a man named Larry, then Jesus would be tainted by *Original Sin* and we'd all be lost and on our way to Hell.

A trampoline will still bounce if you remove a spring or two, but Christianity is not like that. Remove the virgin birth, and the whole thing indeed falls apart. Rob's trampoline analogy doesn't work.

And this leads us to Rob's unusual interpretation of Matthew 16 where he talks about "binding and loosing."

"Notice what Jesus says in the book of Matthew: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

What he is doing here is significant. He is giving his followers the authority to make *new* interpretations of the Bible. He is giving them permission to say, 'Hey, we think we missed it before on that verse, and we've recently come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means'" (p. 50).

Please note how Rob read his own bias into the text of Matthew. Rob already believed that truth changes and that each generation must come up with new interpretations, and so he found support for that presupposition in Matthew 16:19.

Matthew 16:19 says, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Was Jesus giving His disciples authority to come up with new interpretations of Scripture? We could not conclude this if we look at the whole counsel of God to see what all of Scripture has to say about "binding and loosing."

Bible teacher John MacArthur did an excellent job showing from the Scriptures that "binding and loosing" had to do with church discipline, and not anything to do with changing interpretation. MacArthur wrote:

[Binding and loosing] must be understood in the context of [Matthew] 18:15–17, where Christ laid out specific instructions for dealing with sin in the church... The sum of it all means that any duly constituted body of believers, acting in accord with God's Word, has the authority to declare if someone is forgiven or unforgiven. The church's authority is not to determine these things, but to declare the judgment of heaven based on the principles of the Word. When they make such judgments on the basis of God's Word, they can be sure heaven is in accord. In other words, whatever they "bind" or "loose" on earth is already "bound" or "loosed" in heaven. When the church says the unrepentant person is bound in sin, the church is saying what God says about that person. When the church acknowledges that a repentant person has been loosed from that sin, God agrees" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, Matthew 16:19).

Jesus was not giving His disciples license to re-interpret Scripture, but in context was giving His disciples authority to proclaim someone saved or damned based on their reaction to the gospel message. Rob's interpretation fits his preconceived notions that the Scriptures are mysterious and unknowable, but do not square with reading the passage in its context.

Ironically, as Rob rejects that we can truly know the truth found in the Bible, he makes the case that we can know truth found in secular sources. In fact, Rob goes further and exhorts Christians that we ought to claim the truth found in extra-biblical sources. Rob claims that the Apostle Paul did just that with the Athenians on Mars Hill.



“At one point [Paul is] talking about how God made us all, and he says to them, ‘As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” He quotes their own poets. And their poets don’t even believe in the God he’s talking about. They were talking about some other god and how we are all the offspring of that god, and Paul takes their statement and makes it about his God. Amazing.

Paul doesn’t just affirm the truth here; he claims it for himself. He doesn’t care who said it or who they were even saying it about. What they said was true, and so he claims it as his own.

This affirming and claiming of truth wherever you find it is all through the writings of Paul” (p. 79).

The big difference between Paul quoting a Pagan poet and us treating extra-biblical sources as true is that Paul was divinely inspired, and we are not. This verse from Acts 17 does not give us license to quote unsaved people as if they’re Scripture. It’s sadly ironic that Rob attacks *Sola Scriptura*, and he teaches that we can’t really know what God said in the Scriptures, but here he argues that we can find truth from non-inspired sources.

In fact, Rob brags about the fact that we ought to be free to find and embrace extra-biblical truth wherever we find it:

“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” (p. 80).

If we follow Rob’s views out to their logical conclusion, then we ought to embrace truth found in Muslim scriptures. Why stop there? According to Rob, we ought to embrace truths found in Hindu Scriptures, and Mormon scriptures. Why not? Rob says “truth is bigger than any religion.” All religions have *some* truth. In fact, Rob does not come far from doing just this. We will see later in this review that Rob has been influenced and actively promotes Hindus, unsaved Jewish Rabbi’s, and even members of the “Jesus Seminar” a group that routinely attacks the inspiration of the Scriptures.

Regarding why so many young people walk away from church when they go off to college, Rob explains:

“Imagine what happens when a young woman is raised in a Christian setting but hasn’t been taught that all things are hers and then goes to a university where she’s exposed to all sorts of new ideas and views and perspectives. She takes classes in psychology and anthropology and biology and world history, and her professors are people who have devoted themselves to their particular fields of study. Is it possible that in the course of lecturing on their field of interest, her professors will from time to time say things that are true? Of course. Truth is available to everyone.

But let’s say her professors aren’t Christians, it is not a ‘Christian’ university, and this young woman hasn’t been taught that all things are hers. What is she has been taught that Christianity is the only thing that’s true? What is she has been taught that there is no truth outside the Bible? She’s now faced with this dilemma: believe the truth she’s learning or the Christian faith she was brought up with.

Or we could put her dilemma this way: intellectual honesty or Jesus?” (p. 81).

This is a “straw-man” argument. Of course there are true things to be found outside the Bible, but they are not divine revelations. The Bible doesn’t tell us how to fix a broken carburetor! But Rob is wrong when he concludes that “intellectual honesty” and “Jesus” are mutually exclusive, as if believing in Jesus means being intellectually dishonest.

Regarding having to choose what’s taught in the Bible, or what is taught by other sources, Rob says:

“it isn’t a choice, because Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, the life.’ If you come across truth in any form, it isn’t outside your faith as a Christian. Your faith just got bigger. To be a Christian is to claim truth wherever you find it” (p. 81).

Rob quoted John 14:6, which in its context is about rejecting false teachers and false religions. The whole verse says, “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” John 14:6 does not teach that we can assimilate truth from other religions into Christianity to make Christianity “bigger.” Quite the contrary, John 14:6 teaches the exclusivity of Jesus, and that Jesus is the only true path to God. Rob’s understanding of John 14:6 is 180 degrees wrong. Yes, Christians can claim truth wherever it is found, but not when it contradicts the Scriptures. What Rob fails to mention is that all “truth” must submit to the test of God’s Word.

And not only must all “truth” submit to God’s Word, but it must submit to God’s church as well.

The Bible teaches that the church of Jesus Christ is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). This is an important fact. You see, one of the purposes of the church of Jesus Christ is to be a guard against false teachings. Consider the Mormons. They claim that in 1830 AD, a messenger from God spoke to a young farm boy name Joseph Smith and delivered to him a new set of teachings. Some of the new teachings were that Jesus is the brother of the devil, God the Father was once a human being, there are infinite number of Gods, and man can, through good works, become a God some day. Despite being demonstrably unbiblical, a Christian can legitimately counter a Mormon by asking how this teaching had been missing for 1,800 years.

You see, Jesus established His church approximately 33 AD, and His church is “the pillar and ground of the truth.” Therefore, should someone come along some number of years later teaching a new doctrine, we can safely reject it based on the fact that the true church of Jesus has never taught that doctrine in 2,000 years of church history.

Rob teaches the opposite. Rob exhorts Christians of each new generation to “bind” and “loose” new teachings and assimilate “truths” from other religions into Christianity to make “Christianity bigger.” This view not only fails when tested against Scripture, but fails the guard of 2,000 years of established doctrine as understood and taught by Christ’s true church.

## Heretical Errors:

There are many errors in Rob Bell’s *Velvet Elvis*, but it is important to distinguish between those errors that are heretical, and those that are aberrant.

Heretical errors are the most serious, because these are errors that, if held, show that a person is not a true Christian. These are errors that expose that a person is not a true child of God. For this reason, these are the most serious.

Aberrant theology, though serious in nature and worthy of correction, are the type of errors that a true Christian could hold and still be “in the faith.”

This begs the question: how do we tell which errors are heretical and which are aberrant? The answer is in the Word of God.

In the Apostle John’s first letter to young Christians, he wrote this stern warning, “Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father” (1 John 2:23). Therefore, should someone deny the Son, or teach a different Jesus, then that person does not have the Father. This is why it is essential that a person believe in the biblical Triune God: Father, Son, Spirit; three distinct beings, yet one God. If a man or woman denies this Jesus, he or she shows that he or she never had the Father to begin with.

In John’s second letter, he wrote, “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God” (2 John 9). This verse supports 1 John 2:23 above. Again, if someone has a wrong view of “the doctrine of Christ” then that person is guilty of a heretical error.

Therefore, errors about the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the like, are heretical errors.

The Christians living in Galatia were being tempted by false teachers to reject the biblical gospel as taught by the Apostle Paul. What was Paul’s gospel? Man is utterly sinful and dead in transgressions (Romans 3:10; Ephesians 2:1,5), we deserve eternal condemnation in Hell (Romans 6:23), Jesus is the only acceptable sacrifice for our sins (Romans 3:24-25), we are justified by faith alone (Romans 5:1; Galatians 2:16, 3:24; Titus 3:7), and nobody can be justified through good works (Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9). The Galatian Christians had false teachers who tried to convince them to deny this gospel, and Paul rebuked this idea with these words, “If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:9). That’s very strong language: “let him be accursed.” According to this verse, believing a wrong gospel is a heretical error.

Harmonizing these verses, heretical errors include:

- Wrong view of the Trinity (wrong view of Jesus)
- Wrong view of the exclusivity of Christianity (that you can be saved without Jesus)
- Wrong view of the state of mankind (that man is utterly sinful and dead in transgressions)
- Wrong gospel (salvation by grace alone through faith alone apart from works)

Sadly, all throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob shows in his own words that he has embraced each one of these heretical errors.

### **Wrong View of the Trinity:**

Please recall that Rob likened his version of Christianity to a trampoline, with each doctrine being a spring that could be removed, examined, stretched, and even removed. (See *Velvet Elvis*, “Movement One”).

In giving examples of springs, Rob defines the Holy Spirit as a presence.

“Take, for example, the doctrine - the spring - called the Trinity. This doctrine is central to historic, orthodox Christian faith. Where there is only one God, God is somehow present everywhere. People began to call this presence, this power of God, his ‘Spirit’” (p. 22).

Rob is correct to point out that the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the orthodox Christian faith, but please notice what he says about the Holy Spirit. “People began to call this presence, this power of God, his ‘Spirit’.” Rob is completely wrong about the nature of the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches that God’s Spirit is an actual person with a will, not merely a “presence.”

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (The Jehovah’s Witnesses) teach the same thing about the Holy Spirit that Rob teaches, that the Holy Spirit is God’s “presence” on earth. This is unquestionably heretical.

Regarding the need for two witnesses to validate a truth claim, Rob points out that at Jesus’ baptism, John the Baptist validated him, as well as “a voice from heaven” (p. 49).

Rob completely skipped over the fact that the Holy Spirit validated Jesus as well by descending upon Him visibly. This is understandable when we realize that Rob has already demoted the Holy Spirit to a mere “presence.”

Further evidence of Rob’s heretical view of the Holy Spirit can be found when he discusses the early church’s decision about Gentile converts. Rob wrote:

“When those first Christians in Acts 15 came out of their meeting and announced their decision regarding the Gentiles, they said the strangest thing: ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.’

Let me repeat that one phrase again: ‘It *seemed* good to the Holy Spirit and to us.’

They are making a monumental decision in the history of Christianity, and the best they can say is that it *seems* like it is the best decision? It seems good to them and the Holy Spirit?

They don’t claim to have an absolute word from God on the matter; they at best claim guidance from the Spirit of God, but they even hold that loosely” (p. 57).

Rob is 100% wrong. He doesn’t understand the deity of the Holy Spirit. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit” is indeed an “absolute word from God.” In saying that the disciples merely had a word from the Holy Spirit, but not from God, Rob demonstrated that he denies that the Holy Spirit is an actual person, 100% co-equal with the Father and the Son. This is a damnable heresy.

Rob showed his heretical view of the Holy Spirit when he talked about Jesus leaving the church at His ascension. Read the following excerpt carefully:

“[The disciples] don’t realize what they are capable of.

So at the end of his time with his disciples, Jesus has some final words for them. He tells them to go to the ends of the earth and make more disciples. And then he leaves. He promises to send his Spirit to guide them and give them power, but Jesus himself leaves the future of the movement 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.

God has an incredibly high view of people. God believes that people are capable of amazing things.

I have been told that I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is that Jesus believes in me.

I have been told that I need to have faith in God. Which is a good thing. Bit what I am learning is that God has faith in me.

The rabbi thinks we can be like him” (p. 134).

Jesus said in Matthew 28:20, “Io, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Jesus did not leave the disciples alone to build the church on their own.

Furthermore, Rob showed his lack of understanding regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit when he parenthetically said, “He promises to send his Spirit to guide them and give them power, but Jesus himself leaves the future of the movement in their hands.”

If Rob truly understood that the Spirit is both a person and a member of the Godhead, then he would never have been able to say that Jesus left them alone.

Rob’s heretical views regarding the Trinity do not end with a misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit, but of Jesus as well.

“[Jesus] said at one point that if you had seen him, you had ‘seen the Father’. He claimed to be showing us what God is like. In his compassion, peace, truth telling, and generosity, he was showing us God” (p. 21).

Rob teaches that Jesus was showing people what the Father was like because Jesus acted like the Father in his “compassion, peace, truth telling, and generosity.” This quote comes from John 14:9, and in that passage Jesus was explaining the Triune nature of God, not merely claiming that God can be seen when we act a certain way. If I, a human being, act peaceful, truthful, and generous, you will not see the Father. John 14:9 is not a prescription for how we ought to act, but is one of the strongest verses in the Bible in defense of the deity of Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity is taught all over the Bible, even in the Old Testament. Yet Rob teaches that it was not known until much later.

“This three-in-oneness understanding of God emerged in the several hundred years after Jesus’ resurrection” (p. 22).

“But over time this belief [the Trinity], this understanding, this doctrine, has become central to how followers of Jesus have understood who God is. It is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it. It was added later. We can take it out and examine it. Discuss it, probe it, question it. It flexes, and it stretches” (p. 22).

“As [Jesus’] movement gathered steam, this Jewish man came to be talked about more and more as God, fully divine as well as fully human. As his followers talked about him and did what he said and told and retold his stories, the significance of his life began to take on all sorts of cosmic dimensions” (p. 124).

Rob has it backwards here. Jesus’ life did not begin to take on cosmic significance as His followers told the stories, but He was always cosmically significant. The Trinity always was true, and was not added later. This is what the “Jesus Seminar” teaches. (Not inconsequentially, by the way, Rob speaks glowingly of Markus Borg, a fellow of the “Jesus Seminar.” You can skip ahead to the section called “Wrong Influences” on page 41 of this review to see for yourself.) When Rob echoes the Jesus Seminar’s view

that the Trinity was a doctrine added by the church later, and not eternally true of the nature of God, he is teaching heresy.

### **Wrong View of the Exclusivity of Christianity:**

One inescapable aspect of the biblical gospel is the exclusivity of Christianity, or, said another way, there is no salvation possible outside of repentance and faith in Christ. This message of exclusivity is found throughout the Scriptures, but perhaps the two most-cited are John 14:6 and Acts 4:12.

John 14:6 says, “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Rob wrote the following about this verse:

“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” (p.21).

Please note that Rob failed to quote the entire verse. He significantly left out the part that says “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Rob is completely wrong when in his commentary on this verse where he wrote, “Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions.” In fact, Jesus was saying just that. Jesus was saying that there is only one true religion, and that was His religion. Jesus declared all other ways false.

Rob wrote more about John 14:6 later in his book.

“I don’t follow Christianity because I think Christianity is the best religion. I follow Jesus because he leads me into ultimate reality. He teaches me to live in tune with how reality is. When Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me’, he was saying that his way, his words, his life is our connection to how things truly are at the deepest levels of existence” (p. 83).

Actually, when Jesus said “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me,” He meant exactly that - no man cometh unto the Father but by Jesus. Rob twisted this clear scripture to mean that it’s Jesus’ “way, his words, his life” that brings us to God.

The Bible teaches that it is Jesus and His work alone that brings us to God, but Rob teaches that if we follow Jesus’ lifestyle, regardless of our external religion, then we are right with God. This is works righteousness, because it teaches that our acceptance by God is based on something we do - namely living like Jesus did and adopting “his way.” This is in direct opposition to clear Scriptures, such as Romans 3:10, Ephesians 3:8-9, Titus 3:5, and many other Scriptures.

Acts 4:12 says very plainly, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Please note how Rob twists this verse to remove the exclusivity of Christianity from it.

“The world was ruled by the Roman Empire, and the Roman Empire was ruled by a succession of emperors called the caesars. The caesars claimed they were sent by the gods to renew creation. Caesar Augustus believed that as the son of god, he was god incarnate on earth, the prince of peace who had come to restore all of creation... One of his popular slogans was ‘There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved than that of Caesar.’...

These first Christians were subverting the entire order of the empire, claiming that there was a Lord, and he wasn’t Caesar... Another of their favorite slogans was ‘There is no other name given

under heaven by which we must be saved than that of Jesus.’ Shocking. They took political propaganda from the empire and changed the words to make it about their Lord” (pp. 162-163).

The words of Acts 4:12 were divinely inspired, yet Rob reduces them to a mere parody of a Roman saying. Rob’s interest in the possible connection to a Roman idiom blinds him to what the verse actually teaches, that salvation comes only through personal faith and repentance in Christ, a teaching Rob denies throughout *Velvet Elvis*.

Rob’s denial of the exclusivity of Christianity is not contained in his gross misunderstanding of John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. Near the beginning of *Velvet Elvis*, Rob made this extraordinary claim:

“I am learning that my tradition includes the rabbis and reformers and revolutionaries and monks and nuns and pastors and writers and philosophers and artists and every person everywhere who has asked big questions of a big God” (p. 14).

Except for very few exceptions, “rabbis” do not embrace the biblical gospel, and neither do most “monks” and “nuns.” The great majority of monks and nuns throughout church history have fought against justification by faith alone. Rob either has an extremely naïve view of Church history, or else he believes that people can be a part of God’s Kingdom who do not believe the biblical gospel.

### **Wrong View of the State of Mankind:**

The Bible consistently teaches the depravity of mankind, that is, that mankind is as bad off as we could be. “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Romans 3:10-12). “For *there is* not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). And there are many other places that teach this cardinal aspect of the gospel. In short: man is not good, man does not seek God, man does not make good decisions. Yet Rob consistently demonstrates that he believes something very different about mankind.

“Perhaps a better question than who’s right, is who’s living rightly?” (p. 21).

The answer, according to the Bible, is that none of us are living rightly. “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Rob has much too high a view of man.

“Over time when you purposefully try to live the way of Jesus, you start noticing something deeper going on. You begin realizing the reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. You are more and more in sync with how the universe is at its deepest levels” (p. 21).

The problem with this statement is that it overlooks the fact that nobody is good enough to live this way. Rob shows his very high view of man.

Regarding the passages in Scripture that might seem “harsh” to us, Rob said the following:

“And yet there are passages in the Bible in which God orders ‘his’ people to kill innocent women and children. The famous story of the people marching around the wall of Jericho, blowing their horns, and then the walls falling down is also a story about slaughter of the innocent” (p. 41).

Rob makes a very natural mistake that is a result of refusing to view the world through the worldview of the Bible. Please note that Rob uses the word “innocent” twice in that paragraph, yet the Bible teaches that there are none innocent. The question Rob ought to be asking is not “Why would God allow the slaughter of the women and children of Jericho” but rather “Why does God not order the slaughter of all of us right now!?!?” The Bible teaches that there are none who are “innocent” and none who are “good,” yet Rob consistently teaches otherwise.

The following is an example of how Rob has taken his preconceived high view of man and come up with a false interpretation of Scripture as a result.

“The first Christians know that Jesus is for everybody, but what do they do with all of these Jewish laws they follow? So they convene a council (*yeshiva* in Hebrew) to discuss it.

After hearing all sides of the issue, they decide to forbid (or should we say that they bind?) several things.

Here is why this is so important: They have to make decisions about what it means to be a Christian.

They actually do it. They gather together and make interpretations of the Bible regarding what it will look like for millions of people to be Christians” (p. 51).

Rob painted a picture of human beings coming up with rules and changing rules based on what seemed good to them, but this wasn’t so. These first Christians were divinely led by God’s Holy Spirit. It was God who was supernaturally forming His church and how they ought to act. Rob missed this completely.

Regarding the Jewish Rabbis of Jesus’ day, Rob wrote:

“They believe the Torah was the way, the truth, and the life.

They believed the best way to live was to live how the Torah said to live” (p. 125).

And they were wrong. The “Torah” is another way of referring to the first five books of the Bible, or the Mosaic Law. The Torah was not given to show us the “best way to live” but was given to show us that none are good and to show us the exceeding sinfulness of our sin.

Please note what the Apostle Paul says about the Torah in Romans 7:7: “What shall we say then? *Is* the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.” Paul was making the case that the purpose of the Law of Moses, or the Torah, was not to show us how to live rightly, but to demonstrate that we all live badly.

This is even clearer in the following words from his letter to the Galatians. “The law was our schoolmaster to *bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24).

Rob’s high view of man’s goodness is demonstrated in the fact that he does not correct the Rabbi’s of Jesus’ day who mistakenly believed that the Torah was to show us how to live right. In contrast, the Torah, according to Paul, ought to humble us and show us how bad we are.



Regarding the teaching that God will destroy the world at the end of the Millennial Kingdom, Rob wrote:

“Remember, when God made the world, he called it good. Why would God destroy something he thinks is good?” (p. 160).

Yes, God did call the earth good. This is found all throughout Genesis, chapter 1. But Rob left out the fall of man in Genesis, chapter 3. Because of man’s sin, the earth is not “good” anymore. On the contrary, it is cursed. It is precisely because God is good that He must destroy this world. God would be cruel not to destroy a fallen evil creation.

Perhaps the most blatant example of Rob’s erroneous view of the goodness of man is found in his bizarre understanding of the story of Peter walking on the water.

“At one point, Jesus’ disciples are riding in a boat and Jesus comes walking by on the water. And one of the disciples says, ‘If it’s you, let me come to you on the water.’

It’s a weird story, isn’t it?

And it gets even weirder when the disciple Peter jumps out of the boat because he wants to walk on water like Jesus...

So this disciple gets out on the water and he starts to sink, so he yells, ‘Jesus save me!’

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” (pp. 133-134).

This is a shockingly man-centered interpretation of this passage. Rob is teaching that Peter’s problem was not that he lost faith in Jesus, but that he lost faith in Peter! This type of thinking is absent from a true Biblical understanding of man. In John 3:30, John the Baptist said, “[Jesus] must increase, but I *must* decrease.” This is the correct view. Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” not, “I can do all things through myself because Jesus believes in me.”

The view that mankind is cursed and inherently evil as a result of the fall is an indispensable teaching of Biblical Christianity, yet, all throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob shows a disregard for this essential teaching, exchanging it for a very high view of man’s goodness. Rob even goes so far as to say that we should not consider ourselves sinners, and challenges where in the Bible we ought to see ourselves as sinners.

“I can’t find one place in the teachings of Jesus, or the Bible for that matter, where we are to identify ourselves first and foremost as sinners” (p. 139).

Well, here's the place: "This *is* a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). If the Apostle Paul saw himself as a sinner, and not just any sinner, but the "chief" of sinners, then so ought we.

As an aside, it is telling that Rob differentiates "the teachings of Jesus" from "the Bible for that matter." The whole Bible is the "teachings of Jesus." Genesis to Revelation is all the equally inspired "Word of God."

### Wrong Gospel:

The Biblical gospel is this:

- Man is utterly sinful and deserving of judgment. "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).
- There is nothing in us that has any merit at all. "But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).
- We are the enemies of God. "you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in *your* mind by wicked works" (Colossians 1:21).
- God is justly angry at sinners. "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7:11).
- Everybody dies, and everybody will face God as Judge. "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).
- God commands everybody to repent. "[God] now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30-31).
- Men must repent. "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).
- Men must confess their sin and believe that God raised Christ from the dead. "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9).
- Men must grow in holiness in order to demonstrate that they have been truly converted. "I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

Throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob articulates a "gospel" much different than the Biblical one. Rob teaches the following:

- Salvation is for everyone, regardless of their religion, with no repentance or even belief required!
- Jesus' death covers everybody, even if they're not Christians.
- The gospel is good news, especially for non-Christians.
- Salvation is equivalent to living the right way, rather than being right with God.

Regarding a young woman who was studying witchcraft, Rob said:

"I hoped that our community would continue to be a safe place for her to question and study and discuss and hear that God loves her exactly as she is" (pp. 89-90).

The Bible does not teach that God loves her "exactly as she is." She's studying Witchcraft. She presently is an enemy of God through her wicked works (Colossians 1:21). The Bible is very clear about what this woman's fate will be: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, **witchcraft**, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told *you* in time past, that **they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.**"

(Galatians 5:19-21, emphasis mine). According to the Bible, this woman must repent or she will go to Hell.

Rob tells the story of some friends of his who asked him to officiate at their wedding ceremony. Please notice what these friends of his think of Jesus, and notice how Rob responded:

“Last year some friends asked me to be the pastor for their wedding ceremony. They had been together for a while and decided to make it official and throw a huge weekend party, and they invited me to be a part of it. They said they didn’t want any Jesus or God or Bible or religion to be talked about. But they did want me to make it really spiritual. The bride said it in her own great way, ‘Rob, do that thing you do. Make it really profound and spiritual!’...

So then I asked them if they thought it was a mistake that they had found each other. And they said, no, they believed they were meant to be together and it was no accident that they met and fell in love. I then asked them, ‘Do you think whatever it is that holds all *this* together is the same thing that has brought you two together?’ They said yes. Same thing...

Then they said they would call this glue, this force, ‘God’...

It [the wedding ceremony and party] ended up being one of the most sacred things I have ever seen or been a part of” (pp. 76-77).

Rob married two unsaved fornicators who outright told him not to mention Jesus, God, or the Bible. Then they created their own false god by calling the “glue” that holds the universe together “God.” That’s idolatry and blasphemy.

And Rob called this “one of the most sacred things I have ever seen or been a part of” when in fact it was not sacred, but an abomination.

Regarding his friends who were married but didn’t want Jesus or God or the Bible mentioned:

“my friends are resonating with Jesus whether they acknowledge it or not. And when they look into each other’s eyes and there is love there - real, passionate love, the kind that would lay down its life for another - I believe that love is made possible by God in Jesus. Their laying down their lives is a picture of God doing the same for every single human being in Jesus, whether we affirm it or not...

In affirming and celebrating all that they did that day on the cliff, my friends are closer to Jesus than they would ever imagine” (p. 92).

According to Rob, these people are “closer to Jesus than they would ever imagine,” yet according to the Bible, these people are not close to Jesus - quite the contrary! When they say they don’t want Jesus or God or the Bible in their ceremony, they are quite far from the Savior.

On pages 151-152 Rob tells the story of a stranger paying his bill for him at a restaurant. The waitress told him he had nothing to pay because it had already been paid.

“My acceptance of what [the waitress] said gave me a choice: to live like it was true or to create my own reality in which the bill was not paid.

This is our invitation. To trust that we don't owe anything. To trust that something is already true about us, something has already been done, something has been there all along.

To trust that grace pays the bill" (p. 152).

This illustration is not Biblical. Rob's illustration paints a reality where everyone is already forgiven (universalism) and whether you believe it or not, you owe nothing. But this is not Biblical. The Biblical teaching is that we are all guilty - we all owe a bill we can't afford, and can never afford, and *only if* we repent and put our faith in Christ, essentially throwing ourselves at Jesus' mercy, then and only then our bill is paid. But Rob teaches that our sin debt is already paid whether we believe it or not; whether we confess our sins or not; whether we repent or not.

Regarding the parable of the "Prodigal Son," Rob wrote:

"The elder son's problem isn't that he doesn't have anything; it's that he has had it all along but refused to trust that it was really true.

We cannot earn what we have always had. What we can do it trust that what God keeps insisting is true about us is actually true.

Let's take this further. As one writer puts it, 'While we were still sinners, Christ dies for us.' While we were unable to do anything about our condition, while we were helpless, while we were unaware of just how bad the situation was. Jesus died.

And when Jesus died on the cross, he died for everybody.

Everybody.

Everywhere.

Every tribe, every nation, every tongue, every people group.

Jesus said that when he was lifted up, he would draw all people to himself.

All people. Everywhere.

Everybody's sins on the cross with Jesus.

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'. All things, everywhere" (pp. 145-146).

Biblical "grace" is undeserved favor for those who repent and put their faith in Christ. "Grace" to Rob can be summed up as "unearned salvation because everyone is already saved to begin with." You see this when Rob wrote, "We cannot earn what we have always had."

The Bible teaches that only those who repent and put their faith in Jesus are forgiven, but Rob teaches that everyone is forgiven; they just don't all know it.

"The problem comes when salvation becomes all about me. Me being saved. Me having my sins forgiven. Me being reconciled to God.

The Bible paints a much larger picture of salvation. It describes all of creation being restored. The author of Ephesians writes that all things will be brought together under Jesus.

Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker” (p. 109).

This is universalism - that everyone gets saved. If Rob believes this, then this explains why he doesn't talk of the need for individuals to repent and believe the gospel, and doesn't appear too concerned that people are heading to Hell.

Please notice the use of the word “everything” in the following sentence.

“Something involving God making peace with the world and creation being reclaimed and everything in heaven and earth being brought back into harmony with its Creator” (p. 124).

Rob was very clear about the fact that he believes that everyone is saved. In fact, he didn't stop there. He teaches that even inanimate objects are covered.

“To make the cross of Jesus just about human salvation is to miss that God is interested in the saving of everything. Every star and rock and bird. All things” (p. 161).

This interpretation of the atonement that it covers inanimate objects is strange indeed.

More troubling is Rob's teaching that Christianity is good news even for those who don't become Christians. This is expressed in the following excerpt:

“Another truth about the church we're embracing is that the gospel is good news, especially for those who don't believe it.

Imagine an average street in an average city in an average country, if there is such a place. Let's imagine Person X lives in a house on this street. Next door is a Hindu, and on the other side is a Muslim. Across the street is an atheist, next door to them an agnostic, and next door on the other side, someone from Ohio.

Imagine Person X becomes a Christian. Maybe she read something or had friends who inspired her to learn more, or maybe she had an addiction and through a recovery movement she surrendered her life to God. However it came to be, she became a follower of Jesus. Let's say she starts living out Jesus' teachings, actually taking him seriously that she can become a compelling force for good in the world. She is becoming more generous, more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving. Is she becoming a better or worse neighbor? If we are her neighbors, we're thrilled about her new faith. We find ourselves more and more grateful for a neighbor like this. We wish more people would be like this” (p. 166).

Rob says “the gospel is good news, especially for those who don't believe it.” He argues that since Christianity makes people act better, the world would be a better place with more Christians around. The Hindu and Muslim and Atheist and Agnostic neighbors would be better off, Rob argues, due to their generous and compassionate and forgiving and loving Christian neighbor.

But this is the opposite of what the Bible tells us will happen. Jesus said, “Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you *from their company*, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake” (Luke 6:22). Please notice the certainty in the Savior's words. He doesn't say “if” men shall hate you, but says “when” men shall hate you. It is a certainty that

the world will hate us for His name's sake. Why? Because the world loves the darkness and hates the light. (John 3:19-20). Rob says that the world will be "thrilled" that we're Christians if we're generous and compassionate and forgiving and loving, yet the Bible tells us emphatically the opposite. "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (1 Timothy 3:12).

Rob says, "the gospel is good news, especially for those who don't believe it," but the gospel is most certainly not good news for those who don't believe it. Those who don't believe it die and go to hell. This is the worse possible news.

Rob wrote:

"If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody" (p. 167).

The gospel is the greatest news for those who repent and put their faith in Christ, but the worst news for everyone else.

The Bible teaches that salvation is when a sinner repents, puts their faith in Christ, and they are given a new heart and a new nature. They are born again. Then they are no longer enemies of God, but are now children of God. The word "righteousness" means "right with God." Before salvation, we are enemies of God (Colossians 1:21), but only after salvation are we made "right with God" (Romans 5:1).

In stark contrast, Rob teaches that salvation is when somebody realizes that they already are loved by God just the way they are, and they already are a child of God, and begins living like Jesus as a result. But even if they don't, they're still loved by God and a child of God nonetheless, because their sin has been paid for whether they believe it or not. This is a radically different "gospel" than the one found in Scripture.

Please notice how Rob exchanges the Biblical definition of salvation with a new understanding of the word in the following excerpt:

"In one sense, salvation is a legal transaction. Humans are guilty because of sin, and God is the judge who has to deal with our sin because he is holy and any act of sin goes against his core nature. He has to deal with it. Enter Jesus, who dies on the cross in our place. Jesus gets what we deserve; we get what Jesus deserved.

For Jesus, however, salvation is far more. It includes this understanding, but it is far more comprehensive - it is a way of life. To be saved or redeemed or set free is to enter into a totally new way of living in harmony with God. The rabbis called harmony with God *olam haba*, which translates 'life in the world to come'. Salvation is living more and more in harmony with God, a process that will go on forever" (p. 107).

This first paragraph wasn't too bad. It was the closest Rob got to the true gospel in the whole book, though he left out the critical aspects of faith and repentance.

But it went downhill really fast in the second paragraph where he concluded that salvation is equivalent to living the right way. Rob showed his much-too-high view of man here. None of us do or even can live the right way. None of us live "in harmony with God." "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

As a result of Rob's false gospel, he puts an emphasis on "living like Jesus."

"Jesus tells a parable about the kind of people who will live with God forever. It is a story of judgment, of God evaluating the kind of lives people have lived. First he deals with the 'righteous', who gave food to the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the prisoner. These are the kind of people who spend forever with God. Jesus measures their eternal standings in terms of not what they said or believed but how they lived, specifically in regard to the hell around them" (p. 148).

Rob misses the point that none are righteous. None do these things. In the words of Isaiah the prophet, "we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rag" (Isaiah 64:6). "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

Watch in the next excerpt how Rob removes the truth that we must repent.

"The remaking of this world is why Jesus' first messages began with 'T'shuva, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

The Hebrew word *t'shuva* means 'to return'. Return to the people we were originally created to be. The people God is remaking us into" (p. 150).

Rob used the Hebrew word *T'shuva*, but the gospels weren't written in Hebrew. They were written in Greek. The Greek word God inspired was *metanoeo*, and that means "repent," not "return." Repentance is much fuller than merely returning. Returning is part of repentance, but only one aspect. We need to repent, not return.

All throughout *Velvet Elvis* it is clear that Rob has exchanged the Biblical gospel for a false one that includes all people, regardless of repentance, regardless of belief, even if they're openly hostile against Christ. This is clearly heretical teaching, as the Apostle Paul himself exhorted Christians, "If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9).

## Aberrant Theology:

In the previous section, we looked at Rob's teachings that are Biblically heretical, that is, that according to the Bible, if someone holds those views, he or she cannot be seen as a truly saved Biblical Christian.

There are other types of doctrinal errors that, though serious and worthy of correction, are not the type that, if held alone, would label someone a false Christian. For the purpose of this review, these later types of doctrinal errors will be referred to as "aberrant Theology."

### Wrong View of Jesus' Purpose:

The Bible teaches us that Jesus came to earth for the purpose of paying a sin debt to make people right with God. Rob, on the other hand, teaches that Jesus came to earth to show people of all faiths the right way to live, and to model the way we all ought to be.

In the following excerpt, please notice Rob's personal reason for being a Christian:

"As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live... I'm convinced being generous is a better way to live.

I'm convinced forgiving people and not carrying around bitterness is a better way to live.

I'm convinced having compassion is a better way to live.

I'm convinced pursuing peace in every situation is a better way to live.

I'm convinced listening to the wisdom of others is a better way to live.

I'm convinced being honest with people is a better way to live" (p. 20).

Rob says that being a Christian is the best way to live because being generous, forgiving, compassionate, peaceful, teachable, and honest is the best way to live. And to that I agree. I agree it is best to live that way. The problem is that Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Muslims and Atheists all believe this to be the best way to live too.

Rob shows his wrong motive for being a Christian. We should not be a Christian because "it is the best way to live," but we must be a Christian to have our sins forgiven. That's the critical piece Rob misses. Other religions might be able to help people to be more generous, forgiving, compassionate, et cetera, but no other religion can offer forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship to the Father.

Regarding the plan of salvation as it is traditionally presented, Rob wrote:

"The presentation often begins with sin and the condition of human beings, separated from God and without hope in the world. God then came up with a way to fix the problem by sending Jesus, who came to the world to give us a way out of the mess we find ourselves in. So if we were to draw a continuum of the story of the Bible, Jesus essentially shows up late in the game" (p. 82).

First, please note that Rob attacks the Biblical teaching of the gospel. The truth is that the gospel does in fact begin with man in sin and separated from God, hopeless to redeem himself on his own. After Rob assailed this Biblical teaching, he wrote, "God then came up with a way to fix the problem." But this is not correct biblically. The Bible clearly teaches that it was God's plan from before the foundation of the world for Christ to die a substitutionary atoning death (Ephesians 1:4), not some *plan B* that God came up with "late in the game." Clearly Rob has a weak view of God's sovereignty.

For Rob, Jesus' primary purpose was not to die a sacrificial death to redeem a fallen mankind, but His primary purpose was to demonstrate to mankind a better way to live. Please notice how Rob described Jesus' purpose in the following excerpt:

"I'm part of this global, historic stream of people who believe that God has not left us alone but has been involved in human history from the beginning. People who believe that in Jesus, God came among us in a unique and powerful way, showing us a new kind of life. Giving each of us a new vision for our life together, for the world we live in" (p. 12).

When Rob said that Jesus came to "show us a new kind of life," he demoted the Son of God from Savior of mankind to a mere social activist. The Bible teaches that Jesus primarily came to pay a sin debt.



## Wrong View of Heaven and Hell:

The Bible teaches that Heaven and Hell are actual places where people's souls go after this life is over. In contrast, Rob defines "heaven" and "hell" as now on earth, depending on whether you live "right" or not. Please note the way Rob defines Hell in the following excerpt:

"If you do any reading on what happened in Rwanda, the word that you'll read most often used to describe it is *hell*.

A hell on earth.

When people use the word *hell*, what do they mean? They mean a place, and event, a situation absent of how God desires things to be. Famine, debt, oppression, loneliness, despair, death, slaughter - they are all hell on earth" (p. 148).

While I agree that what happens in Rwanda and many other places are horrific and worthy of our humanitarian efforts, they are nothing in comparison to the Biblical description of Hell. Jesus described Hell as an awful place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Jesus called it a "furnace of fire" and said there would be "wailing" (Matthew 13:42). He called it "outer darkness" (Matthew 22:13). Jesus said that in Hell, the worm never dies, and "the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44). The Apostle John was shown Hell supernaturally and he described it as "a lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Revelation 19:20) where the inhabitants are "tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

Perhaps most sobering is the following promise, "the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

As awful as Rwanda is, it is not even close to being a "hell" on earth. The inhabitants of the true Hell would give all they had to be out of that lake of fire and live in Rwanda.

Yet Rob trivializes Hell, which is what often happens when you have a low view of Scripture. Rob replaces the Biblical Hell with an allegorical "hell on earth."

"Now if there is a life in heaven, and we can choose it, then there's also another way. A way of living out of sync with how God created us to live. The word for this is *hell*: a way, a place, a realm absent of how God desires things to be. We can bring heaven to earth; we can bring hell to earth.

For Jesus, heaven and hell were present realities. Ways of living we can enter into here and now. He talked very little of the life beyond this one because he understood that the life beyond this one is a continuation of the kinds of choices we make here and now.

For Jesus, the question wasn't, how do I get into heaven? But how do I bring heaven here?

The question wasn't, how do I get in there? But how do I get there, here?" (p. 147).

I'm not certain which New Testament Rob is reading. Jesus had very much to say about both Heaven and Hell, and He was quite clear when He said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Rob is wrong. "Heaven" and "Hell" are not here on earth. They are not places we chose to live in now. They are real places and our souls will inhabit one of them in the future for eternity.

As a result of Rob's mistaken understanding of "Heaven" and "Hell" being a state of mind here and now, he makes strange statements like the following:

"Heaven is full of forgiven people.

Hell is full of forgiven people.

Heaven is full of people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

The difference is how we choose to love, which story we choose to live in, which version of reality we trust" (p. 146).

When I first read that, it made no sense to me. How could Hell be full of "forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for?" But once I understood that Rob defines "Hell" as a state of mind here and now depending on how we choose to live, then his statements make a bit more sense. They're still unbiblical, but at least I could understand how he could say "Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for." Rob believes "Hell" is a "story we choose to live in," whereas the Bible teaches it is an actual place of eternal torment.

Rob similarly misunderstands "Heaven" as well.

"One of the most tragic things ever to happen to the gospel was the emergence of the message that Jesus takes us somewhere else if we believe in him. The Bible ends with God coming here" (p. 171).

Rob is very misleading here. Yes, God does bring Heaven here to earth, but to a different "here." Before God brings Heaven down to earth, He first destroys this fallen world and re-creates it anew without sin. This is one of the major focuses of the book of Revelation. It is very misleading of Rob to leave that part out.

### **Wrong View of Rabbinic Judaism:**

As a Jewish believer in Jesus myself, I found it intriguing how often Rob made reference to Hebrew words in *Velvet Elvis* and how often he referred to the ancient Rabbinic oral tradition. But it quickly became disturbing to me the emphasis Rob places on these ancient Rabbis. While I agree that we must always understand the culture and audience of the Bible, (one of the hallmarks of good hermeneutics!), Rob has allowed himself to be inappropriately influenced by the Rabbis.

Before we discuss what Rob thinks of the ancient Rabbis and what they have to teach us, let us look at what Jesus thought of the ancient Rabbis.

Jesus was quite clear that the Rabbis of His day misunderstood the Scriptures and taught wrong doctrine. Consider this harsh rebuke, "Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with *their* lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition" (Mark 7:6-9).

In another place, Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).

These are stern rebukes!

According to Jesus, the Rabbis of His day were guilty of the following:

- hypocrisy
- saying they honor God, but in actuality their hearts were far from God
- worshiping God in vain
- teaching the commandments of men
- laying aside the commandments of God
- teaching tradition as equal to God’s commands
- rejecting God’s commands
- damning people to Hell through their false teachings.

And these came from only two passages of Scripture. There are many more equally harsh charges that Jesus leveled against the Rabbis of His day.

Despite this, Rob routinely quotes from the oral tradition of Judaism, which was passed down to us through the writings known as the *Talmud* and also the *Mishna*. The *Talmud* and the *Mishna* were collated by the descendants of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

When Rob uses the term “ancient rabbis” it is entirely appropriate for us to substitute “Pharisees” in its place, because the writers of the oral tradition were in fact Pharisees.

Jesus said that the Rabbis of His day made the Word of God null by elevating traditions of men over God’s Word, yet the following is how Rob described the ancient Rabbis:

“Now the ancient rabbis understood that the Bible is open-ended and has to be interpreted. And they understood that their role in the community was to study and meditate and discuss and pray and then make those decisions. Rabbis are like interpreters, helping people understand what God is saying to them through the text and what it means to live out the text” (p. 47).

This is far different than how Jesus described the ancient Rabbis.

Regarding Judaism’s oral tradition (the *Talmud*, the *Mishna*), Rob wrote:

“For thousands of years, brilliant minds had been discussing the words of God, wrestling with what they meant and what it meant to live them out. This developed into a massive oral tradition” (pp. 127-128).

Jesus rebuked these alleged “brilliant minds” for missing the point of the Torah and leading people to Hell.

Despite Jesus’ warning against the teaching of the Rabbis, Rob routinely appeals to their oral tradition to interpret the New Testament. One example is Rob’s unusual understanding of “binding and loosing” which was previously discussed.

Here's another.

“Rabbis would spend hours discussing with their students what it meant to live out a certain text. If a student made a suggestion about what a certain text meant and the rabbi thought the student had totally missed the point, the rabbi would say, ‘You have abolished the Torah,’ which meant that in the rabbi’s opinion, the student wasn’t anywhere near what God wanted. But if the student got it right, if the rabbi thought the student had grasped God’s intention in the text, the rabbi would say, ‘You have fulfilled Torah.’

Notice what Jesus says in one of his first messages: ‘I have not come to abolish [the Torah] but to fulfill [it].’ He was essentially saying, ‘I didn’t come to do away with the words of God; I came to show people what it looks like when the Torah is lived out perfectly, right down to the smallest punctuation marks’” (pp. 47-48).

Actually, Jesus came to die a substitutionary sacrificial death, the just for the unjust. But Rob chose to de-emphasize that, turning “heaven” and “hell” into a present state on earth, and teaching the social gospel that Jesus came to teach us how to live better.

Perhaps most disturbing is that Rob discretely attempted to lump Jesus in along with the Pharisees. He did this in the following excerpt:

“Different rabbis had different sets of rules, which were really different lists of what they forbade and what they permitted. A rabbi’s set of rules and lists, which was really that rabbi’s interpretation of how to live the Torah, was called that rabbi’s yoke. When you followed a certain rabbi, you were following him because you believed that rabbi’s set of interpretations were the closest to what God intended through the Scriptures. And when you followed that rabbi, you were taking up that rabbi’s yoke.

One rabbi even said his yoke was easy” (p. 47).

Rob is alluding to Matthew 11:30 where Jesus said, “For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.” Please notice that Rob called Jesus “one rabbi.” But this is entirely inappropriate! Jesus is not remotely like the many other Rabbis of His day. In stark contrast to the other Rabbis, this Rabbi (Jesus) was God in human form, and unlike the others, He understood and taught the Scriptures perfectly. Jesus was not merely “closest to what God intended through the Scriptures” but was in fact the physical incarnation of the Word of God. It is entirely inappropriate to lump Jesus in with the other Rabbis of His day.

But Rob continues to do that. One example is when he talks about Jesus’ teachings on divorce. Notice how Rob lumps Jesus in as if Jesus is just “one of the gang” of the many Rabbis of the day.

“When Jesus talks about divorce, he is entering into a discussion that was one of the eight great debates of his day. He is interacting with a specific tradition and other rabbis of his day who had said specific things about divorce. The great rabbis Hillel and Shammai had specific yokes in regard to divorce. When Jesus is asked questions about divorce, what he is really being asked is, ‘Who do you side with, Hillel or Shammai?’ People are asking him to enter into the current discussion. And in Jesus’ answer, he sides with one of them. To grab a few lines of Jesus and drop them down on someone 2,000 years later without first entering into the world in which they first appeared is lethal to the life and vitality and *truth* of the Bible” (p. 63).

Actually, Jesus was quoting Genesis, not Hillel or Shammai. Only if you have a low view of Scripture would you conclude that Jesus was quoting the “oral tradition” when it is obvious that Jesus was quoting Genesis.

The incident Rob refers to is found in Matthew, chapter 19, where it says, “And [Jesus] answered and said unto [the Rabbis], Have ye not read, that he which made *them* at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Please note that Jesus said, “Have ye not read.” He didn’t say, “Have ye not heard,” but “Have ye not read.” So this could not be an appeal to the oral tradition as Rob claims since the *Talmud* and the *Mishna* had not been written down yet at the time of Christ. Also, it should be apparent that Jesus was quoting Genesis 2:24 here. Jesus continually rebuked those who taught the traditions of men, yet Rob tries to paint Jesus as another Rabbi quoting the “oral tradition” of the Rabbis. In this he errs.

Scripture makes it clear that there was a strong distinction between Jesus and the Rabbis of His day. Please note what the gospels have to say, “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended [His teaching], the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as *one* having authority, and not as the scribes.” (Matthew 7:28-29). A reading of the ancient oral tradition of the Rabbis will show that they constantly appealed to the authority of other Rabbis. Unlike the Rabbis of Jesus’ day, Jesus was markedly different. “He taught them as *one* having authority, and not as the scribes.” There is a contrast made there. It is altogether incorrect to lump Jesus in with the other Rabbis of His day.

I find it ironic that though Rob is willing to consult the *Talmud* and the *Mishna* on how to correctly interpret “binding and loosing,” “yoke,” et cetera, he does not seem to quote what these writings have to say about women.

For example, the *Talmud* says, “It would be better to burn the words of Torah than entrust them to a woman... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her obscenity” (*Jerusalem Talmud*, Sotah 3,4).

The Talmud also prescribes the following prayer, which is still recited to this day by many Orthodox Jews, “Blessed be God that He has not created me a heathen! Blessed be God that He has not created me a slave! Blessed be God that He has not created me a woman!” (Tosephta Berakhoth 7,8).

The *Talmud* and *Mishna* are not unlike many religious texts created by men in that they contain many errors and misunderstandings. In stark contrast stands the inspired Word of God. Rob greatly errs when he uses the tradition of men to help him understand the Word of God.

Rob is correct to point out that Jesus was a Jew and we ought to understand the Jewish roots of the Christian faith to gain a better understanding of Christianity. But Rob mistakenly assumes that Talmudic Judaism is the extension of the Judaism of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. This is historically not the case. Talmudic Judaism had strayed from her Biblical roots before the time of Christ, as is evidenced by Jesus’ many harsh rebukes leveled against the Rabbis of his day.

Since we know from our Lord’s own words that the Rabbis completely misunderstood the truth of God’s Word and will, then we ought not to consult the *Talmud* or the *Mishna* as authoritative commentaries on the New Testament. Rob’s fascination with the ancient Rabbis has led him astray in many areas.

## Wrong Hermeneutics:

“Hermeneutics” is the science of properly interpreting a text. The goal is to understand the original intent of the author in context. All throughout *Velvet Elvis*, Rob makes statements that show his very weak ability to properly interpret the Bible in context. In this section I will highlight some of the more blatant examples of Rob’s bad hermeneutics.

Regarding the physical world, Rob teaches:

“Central to reclaiming creation and being a resurrection community is the affirmation that when God made the world, God said it was ‘good’.

And it still is” (p. 170).

The first sentence is true. God did say the world was “good” after He made it. The second is completely false. Rob left out the part about the fall of man and that the creation is presently cursed. This is terrible hermeneutics!

Regarding whether or not it is okay to question God, Rob said:

“What are some of Jesus’ final words? ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Jesus. On the cross. Questioning God” (p. 31).

This surprised me that Rob came to this conclusion, since Rob focuses so much on Judaism. Rob should have known that Jesus was not “questioning God” but quoting Psalm 22:1, a very well-known Messianic Psalm. This is the Psalm that supernaturally described crucifixion hundreds of years before crucifixion was even invented! Jesus was not questioning God, but was pointing to Old Testament prophecy.

Regarding the Ten Commandments, Rob wrote:

“The Ten Commandments are God teaching people how to discern, and how to live well in relationship between right and wrong with their creator” (p. 86).

This understanding of the purpose of the Ten Commandments is mistaken. When you consult the whole counsel of God, you see that the Law of Moses (the Ten Commandments) are not given to teach “people how to discern, and how to live well” but are quite the contrary given to show people that we don’t live well. Paul said “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Romans 3:19). The purpose of the Law is not to show us how to live well, but to stop our mouths and show us that we are guilty before God. In fact, Paul said, “I had not known sin, but by the law” (Romans 7:7). It was the Law that showed Paul that he was a sinner in need of salvation. Rob completely misunderstands the purpose of the Ten Commandments, but worse, since he teaches that we can successfully follow them (which we can’t), he is teaching self-righteousness.

Regarding the Apostle Paul’s words, “I, not the Lord,” Rob said:

“Notice this verse from 1 Corinthians: ‘To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)...’ Here we have Paul writing to a group of Christians, and he wants to make it clear that the next thing he is going to say comes from him, ‘not the Lord’.

So when a writer of the Bible makes it clear that what he is writing comes straight from him, how is that still the Word of God?" (p. 42).

This is from 1 Corinthians 7:12. The Corinthian Christians had written to Paul to ask him what God says about Christians divorcing unsaved spouses. All the phrase "I, not the Lord" means is that Jesus had not commented on this specific scenario while on earth. Since Jesus did not comment on this specific scenario, Paul gave the Word of God on the matter by his authority as an Apostle of Christ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is clear when you read the verse in its context.

We've already discussed that Rob believes that Christians ought to embrace truth wherever it is found. He attempts to justify this the following way:

"Paul makes a fascinating observation about people in his letter to the Romans. He says at one point, 'Indeed when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves.' *Gentiles* is his word for people who don't follow God, and *law* is his word for the Scriptures. So he says that people who don't know anything about God are able to do the right thing on a regular basis. Without having any instruction from God or the Bible, these people are still able from time to time to live as God created us to live. For Paul, truth is available to everyone" (p. 78).

What Rob glaringly leaves out is the fact that this passage in Romans chapter 2 is in the context of God justly condemning the world. This passage is not about assimilating truth wherever you find it, but the point of the passage is that God is justified in sending Gentiles to Hell because they know they are breaking God's Law, even if they have never heard of Moses.

Regarding Jesus saying "Narrow is the way," Rob teaches:

"It is so hard to look deep inside yourself. My experience has been that very few people do the long, hard work of the soul. Maybe that's why Jesus said the way is narrow." (p. 119).

"To be this kind of person - the kind who selflessly serves - takes everything a person has. It is difficult. It is demanding. And we often find ourselves going against the flow of those around us. Which is why we are reclaiming the simple fact that Jesus said the way is narrow" (pp. 168-169).

Actually, in context, (Matthew 7:13-29), Jesus said the way is narrow because there are few who obey the gospel, not because few are self-actualized. Jesus was warning about the tragedy of false conversion, those who think they are Christians, but aren't. Please notice that Rob left out the part about the way to destruction being wide and there being many who go that way. Rob has such a man-centered understanding.

Regarding the type of people that Jesus called to be His disciples, Rob wrote:

"Jesus calls the not-good-enoughs" (p. 131).

Rob was making the point that Jesus called the ones who weren't scholars to be his disciples, but he left out the fact that Jesus also called Paul, a highly educated man. Rob selectively cherry-picks the passages that support the points he wants to make, leaving aside the passages that make the case against his points. This is the opposite of how we ought to come to conclusions about the Bible.

Regarding Matthew 16:26, (“what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”), Rob said:

“If you’re barely holding on, come clean. Tell somebody. Tell everybody if you have to. Check yourself in somewhere. What is it ever going to mean for you to gain the whole world if you lose your soul in the process?” (p. 120).

Rob has taken one of Jesus’ great warnings to non-Christians to consider the fact that they’re heading to Hell, and he has pathetically reduced it to a self-help message.

We’ve already discussed Rob’s errors regarding his teaching about “binding and loosing.” Let’s look at where his hermeneutic is weak in this regard.

“Jesus said when he was talking about binding and loosing that ‘where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’” (p. 52).

We’ve already seen that Rob is wrong about what “binding and loosing” means. He believes it means that we can come up with new interpretations of the Scriptures, and then he applies that to Jesus’ statement that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). With this Rob concluded that as long as two or three agree on a new interpretation, then Jesus approves. But he took this out of context. Matthew 18:20 is in the context of church discipline. That is immediately obvious if you read the paragraph the verse comes from. Rob consistently takes Scripture and uses it to back up his preconceived ideas, rather than reading what the text says in its context.

Regarding the Creation account, Rob said:

“Is the greatest truth about Adam and Eve and the fruit that it *happened*, or that it *happens*? This story, one of the first in the Bible, is true for us because it is our story. We have all taken the fruit. We have all crossed boundaries. We have all made decisions to do things our way and then looked back and said to ourselves, *What was I thinking?* The fruit looked so great to Adam and Eve for those brief moments, but the consequences were with them for the rest of their lives. Their story is our story. We see ourselves in them. The story is true for us because it happened and because it *happens*. It is an accurate description of how life is. The reason the stories in the Bible have resonated with so many people over the years is that they have seen themselves in these stories” (pp. 58-59).

I’ve read this many times and I’m still not sure if Rob is denying the literal historical story of the Creation account of Genesis chapters one and two. It appears that Rob has chosen to allegorize the story. Either way, the Bible is not powerful because the stories resonate with people. The Bible is powerful because it is God’s Holy Word, of which Jesus was the incarnate version. It is powerful because it is God’s Word, not because we see ourselves in it. We can see ourselves in a Dickens novel, but it’s not the same as the Bible. Rob has a high view of man and a low view of God.

Rob has bad hermeneutics because he starts with his ideas and then hunts in the Bible for Scriptures (often ripped from their context) to support his preconceived beliefs. We ought to let the Bible determine what we believe, rather than starting with a belief and then searching in the Bible for verses that support our preconceived thoughts.



## Wrong Influences:

Proverbs 13:20 gives us a useful principle to follow. It says, “He that walketh with wise *men* shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.” To loosely paraphrase, you end up being influenced by those you hang out with!

It was an eye-opening exercise for me to look up all the references in the endnotes of *Velvet Elvis*. It's shocking the people who have influenced Rob's Theology! Rob has been influenced by and recommends the writings of unsaved Jewish Rabbis, liberal social activists, Hindus, even members of the “Jesus Seminar,” a group that vigorously denies the verbal inspiration of Scripture.

The following are some of the troubling influences found in the endnotes:

### 1. Marcus Borg

Marcus Borg is a fellow of “The Jesus Seminar,” an organization that actively undermines the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

### 17. Abraham Joshua Heschel

Heschel is an unsaved Jewish Theologian. Despite this, Rob refers to him as “the great Abraham Joshua Heschel” (p. 31).

### 18. Robert Farrar Capon

Capon is an Episcopal Priest, a clergyman in a denomination that has long-since abandoned a high view of the Scriptures.

### 46. Anne Lamott

Lamott is a writer known for her liberal views on Christianity. On page 54, Rob calls her “one of my favorite writers.”

### 57. Marcus Borg

We've seen Borg quoted before. Remember, he is a fellow with “The Jesus Seminar.”

### 58. “The best thing I have ever read about the Bible is a transcript of a lecture given by the British scholar N. T. Wright called ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’ published in *Vox Evangelica* 21 (April 1991): 7-32.”

N. T. Wright has co-authored with Marcus Borg, and is accused of denying justification by faith alone, an essential of the true Christian faith.

### 94. Parker Palmer

Palmer is a social activist, not a Theologian.

### 101. Milton Steinberg

Steinberg is an unsaved Jewish Theologian.

123. “You must read *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).”

Willard teaches that you can be saved without knowing Jesus.

143. Ken Wilber

Wilber is a Buddhist.

157. Thomas Cahill

Cahill is a Roman Catholic scholar who studied at Jewish universities.

The endnotes of *Velvet Elvis* reveal that Rob has been influenced by and actively recommends the works of unsaved men and women. It is no wonder that Rob has been lead to embrace and propagate heretical and aberrant Theology.

And if those bad influences on Rob were not troubling enough, Rob recounts a story of the first time he claims to have grasped the awesomeness of God. I place it here under the “Wrong Influences” section because even in something as fundamental as grasping the “awesomeness of God,” Rob found his answer not in Scripture, but, well, you can read for yourself...

“I remember the first time I was truly in awe of God. I was caught up for the first time in my life in something so massive and loving and transcendent and... true. Something I was sure could be trusted. I specifically remember thinking the universe was safe, in spite of all the horrible, tragic things in the world. I remember being overwhelmed by the word *true*. Underneath it all life is somehow... good... and I was sixteen and at a U2 concert. The Joshua Tree tour. When they started with the song “Where the Streets Have No Name”, I thought I was going to spontaneously combust with joy. This was real. This mattered. Whatever it was. I wanted more” (p. 72).

Rob was filled with awe towards God by the lyrics of a secular song at a U2 concert. The lyrics are:

“I want to run  
I want to hide  
I want to tear down the walls  
That hold me inside  
I want to reach out  
And touch the flame  
Where the streets have no name”

Consider what is more likely:

- God used the lyrics of “Where the Streets Have No Name” to touch Rob in a special way, a way that the Bible had not done, or,
- Rob was having an emotional reaction to being among thousands of people at a concert.

We know from God’s Word that God fills the true Christian with genuine awe when we learn of God’s grandeur through His Word, not through an emotional experience so commonly produced in a crowd with music playing.

*Velvet Elvis* is full of heresy, aberrant theology, and bizarre interpretations. It is clear why that is the case when you realize that Rob unashamedly has been influenced by and actively recommends the works of false teachers and members of false religions.

## Bad Conclusions:

We have already discussed many of the false doctrines Rob believes, such as:

- a high view of the state of mankind
- a low view of Scripture
- a denial of the exclusivity of Christianity
- a denial of justification by faith alone
- a denial of a literal Heaven and Hell
- a denial that repentance and faith in the Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God.

As a result of these false doctrines, Rob comes to two dangerous bad conclusions:

- You don't have to defend doctrine
- You should not preach the gospel with words.

## You Don't Have to Defend Doctrine:

Rob is very forthright about the fact that he believes that Christians ought not to expend time and energy defending Biblical doctrines.

For the following excerpt, please remember that Rob sees Christianity as a “trampoline” and essential doctrines as “springs” that can be stretched and even removed. He lambastes those who view doctrines in a rigid manner. He mocks people who believe that essential doctrines can not change as living in “brickworld.”

“Somebody showed me a letter from the president of a large seminary who is raising money to help him train leaders who will defend Christianity. The letter went on about the desperate need for defense of the true faith. What disturbed me was the defensive posture of the letter, which reflects one of the things that happens 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 you to defending the wall. It struck me reading the letter that you rarely defend a trampoline. You invite people to jump on it with you.

I am far more interested in jumping than I am in arguing about whose trampoline is better. You rarely defend the things 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 that they see” (p. 27).

“In brickworld, the focus often becomes getting people to believe the right things so they can be ‘in’. There is often a list of however many doctrines, and the goal is to get people to intellectually assent to these things being true. Once we believe the right things, then we’re in. And once we’re in, the goal often becomes learning how to get others in with us” (p. 35).

The Bible writers earnestly contended for the faith and rebuked heresy. They didn't invite Gnostics to enjoy Jesus with them! Quite the contrary, the Apostle John wrote three epistles arguing against that specific heresy. Rob says you "rarely defend the things you love" but the Apostles spent quite a bit of time defending what they loved most, namely the doctrines of their Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus' own half-brother, Jude, exhorted Christians that we must "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

Despite this, Rob even so boldly asserts that the early Christians didn't try to defend the resurrection of Christ, the cornerstone apologetic of our faith!

"It is important to remember that we rarely find these [early] Christians trying to prove that the resurrection actually occurred... To claim a resurrection had occurred was nothing new: Julius Caesar himself was reported to have ascended to the right hand of the gods after his death. To try to prove there was an empty tomb wouldn't have gotten very far with the average citizen of the Roman Empire; they had heard it all before. This is why so many passages about the early church deal with possessions and meals and generosity. They understood that people are rarely persuaded by arguments, but more often by experiences. Living, breathing, flesh-and-blood experiences of the resurrection community. They saw it as their responsibility to put Jesus' message on display. To the outside world, it was less about proving and more about inviting people to experience this community of Jesus' followers for themselves" (p. 164).

Rob can not get this idea from the New Testament. The Apostles talked about the resurrected Christ all the time! The 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians includes a passionate defense of the essential doctrine of the resurrection. Rob is completely wrong about this. The Apostles and early Christians most certainly did persuade and argue doctrine.

One example was when Paul went to a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica. The Bible says, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead" (Acts 17:1-3).

Please notice what was happening here. Paul showed up, entered a house of worship, and used the Scriptures to show that they had the wrong doctrine. Paul didn't merely invite people "to experience this community of Jesus' followers" as Rob says. No, Paul told them that their beliefs were wrong. Paul alleged that Jesus not only rose from the dead, but that he must have. And note that the Scriptures say, "as his manner was," which means that Paul routinely did this.

The Bible says of the Apostle Paul, "he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks" (Acts 18:4). This was Paul arguing over doctrine based on the Scriptures. And not only did he do this with Jews, but he also warned the Pagan world of the folly of their false beliefs as well. When Paul was in Athens, he began open-air preaching. "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious... Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you... And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that* man whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:22-23,30-31).

Please note what Paul was saying here. The following truths are found in this passage:

- Paul accused the Athenians of being too superstitious (a harsh charge).

- Paul accused them of being ignorant of who the real God is.
- Paul claimed to know the real God.
- Paul warned them that God’s patience for their idolatry was running thin.
- Paul told them that God commands them to repent.
- Paul warned them of a Day of Judgment.
- Paul based all of this on the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Yet Rob says that the early Christians didn’t argue about the resurrection, but merely invited people to experience community. This is just not so. The Bible exhorts Christians to “*be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear*” (1 Peter 3:15). The Greek word translated “answer” is *apologia*, and it means a “defense.”

Rob doesn’t want Christians to stand up to a fallen world or preach against sin.

“It is so toxic for the gospel when Christians picket and boycott and complain about how bad the world is. This behavior doesn’t help. It makes it worse. It isn’t the kind of voice Jesus wants his followers to have in the world” (p. 166).

Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul all called sin “sin” and so ought we. Yet Rob calls it “toxic for the gospel” when we follow in the footsteps of our Savior and stand up for righteousness in a fallen world. Rob is greatly mistaken.

### **You Should Not Preach the Gospel with Words:**

Perhaps most cruel of Rob’s bad conclusions is that Christians ought not to share our faith with words.

Rob has a lot to say about love, but in *Velvet Elvis*, he shows that he does not understand the Biblical definition of love.

“Oftentimes the Christian community has sent the message that we love people and build relationships in order to convert them to the Christian faith. So there is an agenda. And when there is an agenda, it isn’t really love, is it? It’s something else. We have to discover love, period. Love that loves because it is what Jesus teaches us to do. We have to surrender our agendas” (p. 167).

In context, Rob is calling for a stop to evangelism, which is completely opposed to what Jesus commanded us to do and completely unloving. If our “agenda” is to see people converted to the faith, and Rob says that in order to be loving we must “surrender our agendas,” then he is saying we ought to stop trying to see people converted. Rob makes the bizarre case that if you form a relationship with someone with a desire to share the gospel, then that desire to share the gospel is evidence that you do not really love the person unconditionally. This makes no sense!

We share the gospel precisely *because* we love somebody. When you understand that all are born into sin, and that only Christ can forgive sin, it is unloving not to share that message!

The apostle Paul knew a thing or two about love. He wrote what are arguably the greatest words about love in all of literature: 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. This is the “love chapter” read at countless weddings and quoted on innumerable greeting cards. Yet in the very same letter where Paul expounded on love, he also said, “for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Think of it this way. Your neighbor is dying of a disease and you have the cure. Even though he lives next door to you, you've never officially met. But this you know: he is dying of a disease and you alone have the cure. Is it unloving to befriend him so that you can share the cure with him? Of course not! That would be ludicrous. And Rob's claim that "we have to surrender our agendas" (i.e. stop sharing our faith with the unsaved) in order to truly love them demonstrates he does not understand true love.

Only a monster could sit and watch a child drown in a pool when it is within his power to jump in and save the child. It is all the more horrid for a Christian to not share the only name under heaven by which we must be saved. To surrender our agenda to see people saved in the name of "love" is twisted and cruel.

Yet Rob continues to make his case against evangelism:

"And this is because the most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way Jesus is most vividly put on display. To do this, the church must stop thinking about everybody primarily in categories of in or out, saved or not, believer or nonbeliever" (p. 167).

This is 100% against the Great Commission and our purpose as ambassadors of Christ. The Bible says that Jesus commanded us to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 18:19-20). Jesus commanded Christians to go "into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). In 2 Corinthians 5:20, the Apostle Paul told Christians to think of ourselves as "ambassadors for Christ" and to say to a sinful world, "be ye reconciled to God." Despite what Rob teaches, we must warn people to be reconciled to Christ.

Rob has substituted the preaching of sin, judgment, the cross, and repentance for a social program, where Christians ought to do nice things for people without sharing how to be reconciled to God.

"I was just talking to a woman named Michelle who decided to move into the roughest neighborhood in our city to try to help people get out of the cycle of poverty and despair. She was telling me about the kids she is tutoring and the families they come from and how great the needs are. Some other women in our church heard about Michelle and asked her for lists of what exactly the families in her neighborhood need. (One of the families wrote on their list 'heat'.) They then circulated the lists until they found people who could meet every one of the needs" (p. 168).

While I applaud Michelle's humanitarian work, and encourage all Christians to fulfill our mandate to feed the poor and shelter the homeless, unless we also tell them their need for forgiveness and how to be reconciled to God through faith and repentance, we have been ethically negligent. If we feed people and provide heating oil, but don't tell them about Christ, then the well-fed and warm people will some day die and go to Hell. This is not loving.

Regarding a young girl, Jacqueline, who Rob visited in Rwanda who had AIDS, Rob wrote:

"As I knelt down beside her on the floor, I watched Pauline, standing in the corner, weeping. Her friend [Jacqueline] was going to die soon. What overwhelmed me wasn't the death or despair or poverty. What overwhelmed me was the compassion. In this dark place Pauline's love and compassion were simply... bigger. More. It is as if the smallest amount of light is infinitely more powerful than massive amounts of dark. The ground was holy" (p. 74).

This young girl was about to die, but Rob was overwhelmed with Pauline's compassion, not overwhelmed with the fact that if Jacqueline died in her sins, she would spend eternity in Hell. Rob didn't mention Jacqueline's salvation as one of the things on his mind.

Regarding evangelistic missionary work, Rob wrote:

“Have you ever heard missionaries say they were going to ‘take Jesus’ to a certain place? What they meant, I assume, was that they had Jesus and they were going to take him to a place like China or India or Chicago where people apparently didn't have him.

I would ask them if people in China and India and Chicago are eating and laughing and enjoying things and generally *being held together*? Because if they are, then Jesus, in a way that is difficult to fully articulate, is already present there” (p. 88).

Rob is right to say that these people may very well be eating and laughing and enjoying themselves, but if they have not responded to the proclamation of the Biblical gospel with repentance and faith, they will perish on the Day of Judgment. He doesn't seem all too concerned about this. On the contrary, he mocks those missionaries who give all they have to go to evangelize these people.

“Some people actually believe that God is absent from a place until they get there. The problem with this idea is that if God is not there before you get there, then there is no ‘there’ in the first place” (p. 88).

Rob assumes that Jesus already exists everywhere, and in a sense he is correct because God is omnipresent. But he misses the point. The gospel of Jesus has not been preached everywhere, and that is a huge problem for the world. There are places where Christ has not yet been preached. Paul spoke of this in Romans 15:20, “Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation.”

Regarding the parable of the wedding feast, notice what Rob leaves out:

“And in another parable, a man has a feast and none of his invited guests come, so he sends word to all the marginalized, disgusting, unclean people who are ‘out’ that they are invited to come ‘in’ and celebrate with him. Again, stunning” (p. 28).

Rob is trying to make the case that God invites everyone to come into His kingdom, regardless of who they are. And in a sense he's right, but he leaves out a critical piece of that parable.

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which **had not on a wedding garment**: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither **not having a wedding garment**? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast *him* into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few *are chosen*” (Matthew 22:11-14, emphasis mine).

Rob is correct to imply that all are invited to God's kingdom, but only those who are appareled in proper wedding garments are chosen to stay. When we read all of the New Testament, it becomes clear that unless a man or woman comes to God's kingdom fitted with repentance and faith, the Bible warns us they will be bound and thrown into “outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

How cruel of Rob to encourage a generation of Christians to re-think the faith and conclude that we ought to “surrender our agendas” of wanting to see people spared of this terrible fate.

## Wrapping It Up:

Perhaps of all the many bizarre statements Rob makes in *Velvet Elvis*, the most unusual is the following:

“I affirm the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity and the inspiration of the Bible and much more. I’m part of it, and I want to pass it on to the next generation. I believe that God created everything and that Jesus is Lord and that God has plans to restore everything” (p. 27).

Rob has gone on record saying that the virgin birth was a “spring” that he could take or leave. He has shown that he does not understand the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and he has consistently sought the authority of ancient Rabbis to interpret the New Testament, so I am puzzled by his claim to affirm the historic Christian faith.

It is one thing to claim that you affirm these things, but it is an entirely different matter when your written statements say otherwise.

Rob has gone on record demonstrating the following errors:

- Wrong view of the Trinity
- Wrong view of the exclusivity of Christianity (that you can be saved without Jesus)
- Wrong view of the state of mankind (that man is utterly sinful and dead in transgressions)
- Wrong gospel (salvation by grace alone through faith alone apart from works)
- Salvation is for everyone, regardless of their religion, with no repentance or even belief required
- Jesus' death covers everybody, even if they're not Christians
- Salvation is equivalent to living the right way, rather than being right with God.

A Pastor who believes and teaches these things should not be upheld as a spiritual leader, and we should neither read, nor recommend his books.

Rob teaches that the true Christian faith is like a “Velvet Elvis” painting that different artists interpret anew over time. But Christianity is not like that. If we must use an “Elvis” illustration, then the true Christian faith is like “Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show.” It is a historic event, and we can go back to the archive, so to speak, to find out definitively what we need to know. The critical missing piece to Rob’s view of God is that God Himself gave us a divine revelation. This divine revelation is perfect and immutable. There is no need to re-interpret to come to a *new* understanding. We need the old understanding. God Himself gave us the Scriptures so that we would know with certainty what the true Christian faith is.



Rob has a low view of Scripture, believing that we can’t understand for sure what the Bible teaches. He teaches that the Bible is mysterious. From this come his many errors.



Some people say, “But there is some good in Rob Bell’s writings.” There may be a few insightful truths to be found in *Velvet Elvis* or one of his other books, but that doesn’t mean we ought to read them. There is some truth to be found in the Jehovah’s Witnesses “Watchtower” magazine, but it would be unwise for Christians to read that magazine looking to grow spiritually. In the same way, it is certainly not worth having to chew through all the rat poison of Rob’s teachings to find a nugget or two of orthodox teaching.

The reality is that though Rob may be a terrific storyteller and an engaging writer, his teachings are wrong and dangerous. Our time is much better spent reading books by men of God who have shown they have a high view of Scripture and teach true doctrine. Or better yet, we can spend our time reading the Scriptures themselves!

I was chatting with a woman who was distressed because she had to drop out of a missions trip that she had been planning on attending with her church. They were going to the New Orleans area to help clean up after the devastating flooding there. But she told me that her conscience was telling her to drop out of the trip as a result of what she learned in the informational meeting. The man running the missions trip instructed the participants clearly “not to talk to the people about Christianity.”

So I asked her where the head of the mission team got this idea. Was there a book or some resource that persuaded him to do good humanitarian work, but not share the gospel?

She said, “Yeah, he was talking about a book by somebody named Rob something.”

“Rob Bell?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s it!” she said. “Rob Bell.”

And then it all made sense.

## Appendix A: Rob’s Misleading Story About How His Church Began:

In chapter four of *Velvet Elvis*, Rob recounted how he came to begin his church, Mars Hill Bible Fellowship:

“My wife and I and several others started this church called Mars Hill in February of 1999 with dreams of what a revolutionary new kind of community could be.

I was twenty-eight.

What do you know about anything when you’re twenty-eight?

But anyway, we did it. We started a church” (p. 96).

Rob also wrote:

“I had this moment in October 1998 when I realized that if thirteen people joined up with us, and that was all it ever was, that would be okay” (p. 96).

So Rob, his wife, and “several others” started a church in 1998, and Rob would have been okay if it only ever grew to have thirteen people. So imagine Rob’s surprise over what happened the first Sunday! Rob recounted the very first Sunday service this way:

“I remember it like it was yesterday. A few people came to get me five minutes before the first service and said I had to look out the front windows. I was not prepared for what I saw. Cars and people everywhere. They proceeded to tell me there were traffic jams in every direction; they had run out of chairs; and people were giving up trying to get through the traffic and just pulling over on the side of the road, parking, and walking the rest of the way” (p. 99).

Even staunch critics must admit that it is quite impressive for a new church to see such amazing attendance the first day! But there is more to the story that Rob left out of *Velvet Elvis*.

What Rob didn’t tell you in his book was that Mars Hill Bible Church was a church plant from Calvary Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, one of the largest churches in Michigan, and where Rob was on staff for approximately five years.

What’s more, Rob neglected to mention in *Velvet Elvis* that Ed Dobson, the head Pastor at Calvary Church, actively marketed for Rob and encouraged approximately 1,000 people from his 5,000-person church to break off to join Rob in his new church plant.

Rob doesn’t mention any of this in *Velvet Elvis*. Here’s what he does say:

“Now I am going to give you some numbers. And I hesitate to do this because few things are more difficult to take than spiritual leaders who are always talking about how big their thing is. But it happened and it’s true and it’s part of my story.

There were well over 1,000 people there the first Sunday” (pp. 99-100).

Now we know why.

(My gratitude to Ken Silva at Apprising Ministries for uncovering this information. Please see Silva’s article, *Rob Bell: The Myth of Mars Hill “Miracle Grow”*, at: [http://www.apprising.org/archives/2006/11/rob\\_bell\\_the\\_my\\_1.html](http://www.apprising.org/archives/2006/11/rob_bell_the_my_1.html)).

## Appendix B: Review of Nooma 009: Bullhorn:

In addition to being a Pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church, and writing books, Rob also stars in a series of short teaching movies called *Nooma*. “Nooma” is the phonetic spelling of the Greek word *pneuma*, which means “spirit.”

It is instructive to review the ninth video in the *Nooma* series, entitled “Bullhorn,” as many of the errors in *Velvet Elvis* are also in this short movie.

“Bullhorn” is a 12 minute short movie that follows a socially awkward man who spends his day in the street passing out literature and preaching to people via a “bullhorn.” And as Rob says about this man, “no one wants any of his pamphlets.”

The video starts with the unnamed “Bullhorn Guy” making photocopies of a pamphlet, using a machine to fold them, and then collating them into a box. The lighting is dark. He’s wearing a starched shirt, tie, and slacks, and his movements are stiff. He’s wearing outdated glasses and has a very short haircut.

In contrast, the camera zooms in on a well-lit Rob Bell relaxed on a bench in the city. He's wearing a t-shirt and comfortable pants, sandals, and has "hip" rectangular glasses.

The difference between the two men is striking.

Rob begins to speak about going to a concert with some friends and hearing a man yelling at a crowd through a bullhorn. He hears the man shout words like "sin" and "burn" and "hell" and "repent" and "Jesus" and telling people that they might not have any more time, they might die tonight. Rob points out that "no one is stopping to hear more."

Rob says that he wants to talk to the "Bullhorn Guy." At 2 minutes, and 30 seconds, Rob says, "Bullhorn Guy, I don't think it's working." Rob says that the Bullhorn guy is "making things worse."

Rob makes the following points in this video:

- People don't understand what condemning and converting has to do with Jesus' message.
- Jesus did not come to condemn, but really loves everyone just the way they are.
- It's God's love that draws people to Jesus.
- The "Bullhorn Guy" sees people as statistics, or notches on a spiritual belt.
- Loving with an agenda isn't really loving.
- What people really need is for us to listen to their story, and pain and dreams.
- Talking about Hell is dangerous because it sounds like a threat.
- We're all tired of hearing from the "Bullhorn Guy." Jesus is tired of it too.
- How you love others is how you love God.

Let's examine each of these points.

### **People don't understand what condemning and converting has to do with Jesus' message.**

At 2 minutes, and 40 seconds, Rob says:

"You see, Bullhorn Guy, it's confusing to my friends and I, because some are Christians and some aren't, but we just don't get it. We just don't understand what all the condemning and the converting, we don't understand what it has to do with Jesus' message."

Given Rob's education and profession, I'm surprised to hear him say that he doesn't understand what "condemning" and "converting" have to do with Jesus' message. The Bible is quite clear that the world is already condemned due to sin and disobedience. Please see John 3:18-19. (We'll consider this passage in the next section.) As for "converting," this is the very heart of Jesus' message. We all must be converted. Jesus taught this. He warned, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be **converted**, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, emphasis mine).

The Apostle Peter had the same message. When the church was first forming, he gave a sermon and warned the crowd, "Repent ye therefore, and **be converted**, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19, emphasis mine). It's ironic that though Peter did not use a bullhorn in Acts, like the "Bullhorn Guy," he most certainly was preaching outside in the open air.

James, who was Jesus' half-brother, said, "he which **converteth** the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:20, emphasis mine).

While I can understand how Rob's non-Christian friends might be confused with all the talk about "converting," I don't understand how a Rob, a Bible teacher, could be confused by what "converting" has to do with Jesus' message. Rob may not like it, but "conversion" is at the very heart of Jesus' message.

Regarding "condemnation," we'll take that up next.

**Jesus did not come to condemn, but really loves everyone just the way they are.**

At 3 minutes, and 8 seconds, Rob says:

"Didn't Jesus say that He came to save and not to condemn? Like that story in the Bible in the book of John where that woman is caught in adultery and the religious leaders like drag her in, in front of Jesus, and they've essentially condemned her to die, and what does Jesus say to her? He says to her, 'I don't condemn you.' I mean, that's why so many of us are so fascinated with Jesus because He never stops insisting that God really, really loves us exactly as we are."

Rob shows his weak hermeneutic again here by selectively quoting from a passage. When Rob asks, "Didn't Jesus say that He came to save and not to condemn?" he was alluding to John 3:17. John 3:17 says, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." But the passage doesn't end there. We have to continue reading. Jesus' whole speech was, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but **he that believeth not is condemned already**, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the **condemnation**, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because **their deeds were evil**. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd" (John 3:17-20, emphasis mine).

Rob selectively left out the part that says that the world is already condemned. The passage even tells us why the world is condemned, and that is because our deeds are evil and men love darkness. This is strong language about sin and righteousness and condemnation and all the stuff that Rob says he and his non-Christian friends "don't get."

Rob also makes reference to John 8:3-11, the story of a woman caught in adultery. Rob correctly recounts that Jesus told her that He does not condemn her, but that's not the whole verse. Jesus' complete words to this woman were, "And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11). Rob selectively left out the part where Jesus exhorted the woman to, "go, and sin no more." When you read the whole story, you realize that it's not about Jesus refusing to condemn a woman, but it is about Jesus condemning all her self-righteous accusers, showing them that they are sinners too, and calling this woman to repentance.

Whether we are comfortable with it or not, sin, righteousness, and condemnation are central teachings of the Bible, and it's not right for us to leave out the passages we don't like.

**It's God's love that draws people to Jesus.**

At 3 minutes, and 41 seconds, in regard to his claim that God loves everyone just the way we are, Rob says:

"I mean, isn't that what draws you to Him? It's what draws me."

First of all, does God really love everyone “exactly as we are?” The Bible teaches that God does not love us “exactly as we are.” The Bible says that until God reconciles somebody through faith and repentance, that person is “alienated and enemies” of God “by wicked works” (Colossians 1:21). Jesus said “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3,5). According to Jesus, we must repent or we will go to Hell. God does not love us “exactly as we are.” Repent means to change, to turn from our sin. It is not honest for Rob to ignore where the Bible warns that God “commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30-31).

Rob says it’s because God loves everyone exactly the way they are that draws him to Jesus. So this begs the question, “What ought to draw us to Jesus?”

Jesus Himself gave the answer to this question. He said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die” (John 12:32-33). So according to Jesus, the thing that ought to draw people to Himself is the cross!

Think about it: we are alienated from God because of our sin, and yet Jesus died on a cross to redeem us. What an amazing love. What an amazing God! It is the cross that ought to draw us to Christ. Our sin was placed on Jesus, and Jesus, the just, was sacrificed for us unjust. Wow - now that ought to draw people, not the petty and false assurance Rob says draws him. The cross is so much grandeur!

**The “Bullhorn Guy” sees people as statistics, or notches on a spiritual belt.**

At 4 minutes, and 52 seconds, Rob says:

“And see, Bullhorn Guy, this is why the yelling and the bullhorn are so disturbing to us, because it seems like you’re just trying to convert people to your religion, like they’re notches on some sort of spiritual belt, but they’re not, they’re people. They’re people that God loves. They’re people that Jesus wants us to love. They aren’t statistics. They aren’t numbers. They aren’t possible conversions.”

Rob is in dangerous territory here, as he is assessing the motives of his fictional “Bullhorn Guy.” You are generally on perilous ground when you suppose to know the heart of another individual.

Might there be those who evangelize with impure motives? I’m sure that’s possible, but if there were, then we ought to rejoice nonetheless. That is, we ought to rejoice if we have a Biblical understanding.

Rob is annoyed by the “Bullhorn Guy,” but he ought not to be. When the Apostle Paul was alive, there were those who preached Christ with impure motives, just as Rob accuses the “Bullhorn Guy” of doing. Paul said there were some who “preach Christ of contention, not sincerely” (Philippians 1:16). This is harsh criticism. Paul was saying there were people who preached Christ insincerely, even with the purpose of creating contention. And how did Paul respond to this? “Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). Paul rejoiced that Christ was preached, even if by impure motives of the preacher! If Rob really believes that his fictional “Bullhorn Guy” has impure motives, and if Rob has a Biblical worldview, then he ought to rejoice nonetheless, because Christ is preached. Sadly, Rob does not react like Paul. Rob shows his unbiblical worldview by exhorting the “Bullhorn Guy” to stop preaching Christ.

## Loving with an agenda isn't really loving.

At 5 minutes, and 16 seconds, Rob says:

“If I'm loving somebody with an agenda, then it isn't really love is it?”

This is the same as one of the points Rob made in *Velvet Elvis*. Rob has a lot to say about love, but he shows that he does not understand the Biblical definition of love.

“Oftentimes the Christian community has sent the message that we love people and build relationships in order to convert them to the Christian faith. So there is an agenda. And when there is an agenda, it isn't really love, is it? It's something else. We have to discover love, period. Love that loves because it is what Jesus teaches us to do. We have to surrender our agendas” (*Velvet Elvis*, p. 167).

In context, Rob is calling for a stop to evangelism, which is completely opposed to what Jesus commanded us to do and completely unloving. If our “agenda” is to see people converted to the faith, and Rob says that in order to be loving we must “surrender our agendas,” then he is saying we ought to stop trying to see people converted. Rob makes the bizarre case that if you form a relationship with someone with a desire to share the gospel, then that desire to share the gospel is evidence that you do not really love the person unconditionally. This makes no sense!

We share the gospel precisely *because* we love somebody. When you understand that all are born into sin, and that only Christ can forgive sin, it is unloving not to share that message!

The apostle Paul knew a thing or two about love. He wrote what are arguably the greatest words about love in all of literature: 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. This is the “love chapter” read at countless weddings and quoted on innumerable greeting cards. Yet in the very same letter where Paul expounded on love, he also said, “for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

The Bible teaches us that it is because we love that we preach the gospel.

## What people really need is for us to listen to their story, and pain and dreams.

At 7 minutes, and 7 seconds, Rob says:

“And, see, Bullhorn Guy, there's so much that you can do, that we can do, there's so much good that we can do to help. I mean there are so many people who just need somebody to listen, not to preach to them, and not to try to convert them, but just to listen, to listen to their story, and, and to listen to their pain, and to listen to their dreams.”

This point really tells us something about what Rob thinks about the state of mankind. The Bible teaches us that men's hearts are “deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). The Bible tells us that “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). God gave us the Ten Commandments to show us that we are all liars, and thieves, and murderers, and adulterers, and blasphemers, and worse! The Bible reveals to us that “God is angry *with the wicked every day*” (Psalm 7:11), and that “we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans 14:10).

If we have a Biblical worldview, then we will understand that man's greatest need is forgiveness of sin, because God will “judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). Yet Rob says that we do good, not by

warning people of the wrath to come and preaching the cure (repentance and faith) but by listening to people's "story" and "pain" and "dreams." This shows us Rob's unbiblical view of man's greatest need.

It's not a bad thing to listen to people's "story" and "pain" and "dreams," but not in exclusion of preaching righteousness and judgment and their need to convert. Rob says that people don't need anyone to "preach to them" or "to try to convert them." Actually, that's exactly what they need.

### **Talking about Hell is dangerous because it sounds like a threat.**

At 7 minutes, and 47 seconds, Rob says:

"And, see, Bullhorn Guy, that's why the hellfire and brimstone stuff is so dangerous. When you tell me that I should follow Jesus so that I don't burn forever, it sounds like a threat. As if like you scare people enough they'll all of a sudden magically decide to love God and follow Jesus, but that isn't what Jesus did. Jesus went around inviting people into the best possible kind of life. I mean, at one point He even says, 'I come, that you might have life, and have it to the fullest.' You just don't find Jesus waving Heaven in front of people as some sort of carrot on a stick."

Actually, Jesus spoke quite a bit about both Heaven and Hell. Regarding Hell, Jesus said it was a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Jesus called it a "furnace of fire" and said there would be "wailing" (Matthew 13:42). He called it "outer darkness" (Matthew 22:13). Jesus said that in Hell, the worm never dies, and "the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44, 46, 48).

So strong was Jesus' concern for people going to Hell that he even said it would be better to dismember yourself than to go there! "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast *it* from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not *that* thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast *it* from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not *that* thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:29-30).

Regarding Heaven, Jesus likened it to a "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46), that is worth selling all you have to gain.

Rob says this all sounds like a "threat" but that demonstrates that he holds a low view of Scripture. It shows that he doesn't really believe that Hell is a real place and Heaven is a real place.

Think of it this way: Because I really believe that my children will be run over if they cross a highway without looking both ways, I warn them of the danger. I do this because I truly love them and am concerned for their safety. Only a fool would accuse me of "threatening" my kids with awful stories of being run over! On the contrary, if I didn't warn them, I'd be a devil.

When you have a high view of Scripture, and you know that Heaven and Hell are real, then, if you truly love people, you will do all you can to give them the greatest message of all - that they, a sinner, can be reconciled to God through faith in Christ and repentance of sin as a result of the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross. What a Savior!

## **We're all tired of hearing from the "Bullhorn Guy." Jesus is tired of it too.**

At 9 minutes, and 41 seconds, Rob says:

"So Bullhorn Guy, I'm asking you in love, on behalf of all of us, to please put the bullhorn down. I'm tired of it. We're all tired of it. I think, I think Jesus is tired of it."

I don't know who the "all of us" are that Rob claims to speak for, because I am personally greatly encouraged when I see somebody stepping out in faith and lovingly sharing the great news of the True and Living God who sent His Son to die on behalf of sinners so that we might be reconciled through faith and repentance. This is the message of the Bible, and the Apostle John tells us, "We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us" (1 John 4:6). Quite simply, one of the marks of being a true Christian is that you "hear" those who preach the truth. The truth is that all have sinned and deserve the judgment of God. Yet Christ died on the cross to offer a way to be reconciled to God. Yes, words like "sin" and "burn" and "hell" and "repent" and "Jesus" will be used when we preach the Biblical gospel, and as John said, "he that is not of God heareth not us."

Jesus commanded us to reach a dying world with the message of reconciliation. We may or may not agree with the fictional "Bullhorn Guy's" style, but his message is Biblical. Rob is way out of line by stating that "Jesus is tired of it."

## **How you love others is how you love God.**

At 10 minutes, and 47 seconds, Rob says:

"See there are massive numbers of us, all over the place, who are serious about following Jesus, who actually believe Him when He says that He brought us life and life to the full. We want the best possible life, here and now, the kind that goes on forever, the kind that Jesus invites us to. And so we're pursuing it, and we're learning how to live it, and we're learning how to love people, not because we're trying to get them into our little club, and not because we want everyone to be the same, but because this is what Jesus teaches us to do. So may you see that how you love others is how you love God. That's it. That's the way of love. That's the way of Jesus."

Rob is 100% correct when he says that how you love others is a measuring stick for how you love God. Ironically, it is this truth that condemns Rob. You see, the way to love your neighbor biblically is so much more than feeding him or clothing him or providing heat. There is nothing more loving than to warn a person about the coming judgment of God and to share with them the only "name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Imagine a blind man walking towards a cliff. You and I can see where the man is heading. We can tell he's blind. We know there is a 300 foot drop. Only a monster would walk up to the blind man and ask if he needs any food or clothing. Only a monster would stop the man, listen to his story, pain, and dreams, and then send him along on his way towards the cliff! That's not loving!

When a man or woman has a high view of Scripture, then he or she will understand that all who have not repented of their sin and put their faith in Christ are in much more dire a situation than a blind man heading towards a cliff. If we listen to people's stories and pain and dreams, but then not give them the cure for their sin disease, then we have treated that person with ultimate contempt. We have been unloving.



I agree with Rob that how we love others is a measuring stick for how we love God, and if we truly love God, then we will earnestly warn people that they must repent and put their faith in Christ, because God will judge the world in righteousness. To do otherwise is to be callously unloving.

### **Some Final Words about “Bullhorn.”**

This short video is skillfully produced with a professional musical soundtrack and effective direction. It is no accident that the “Bullhorn Guy” is presented in bad lighting with shadows while Rob is presented well lit. It is no accident that the “Bullhorn Guy” moves with robotic stiffness while Rob lounges comfortably on his bench. It is no accident that the “Bullhorn Guy” is dressed unfashionably while Rob is dressed casually and stylish.

I don’t know if this “Bullhorn Guy” was modeled after a real person Rob knows, but I can give testimony that I have the privilege to know many people who engage the culture in evangelism through handing out tracts, and even preaching in the open air. None of the people I know fit the parody of the character in this video. The ones I know care deeply for the souls they are witnessing to, and never see them as “statistics” or “numbers” or “notches on a spiritual belt.” The people I know who engage in evangelism typically do so with lots of prayer, humility, and a sincere desire to see people reconciled to God. Some of them even wear “hip” rectangular glasses!

The true danger for Christianity is not that there are those who are willing to engage the culture and warn them of the judgment to come, but there are those who embrace the culture, and preach a false gospel that God will accept everyone without repentance or faith or believing the gospel. This idea is completely foreign to Jesus’ message as found in the Bible.

If this “Bullhorn Guy” really did exist, then I would rejoice for him. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Philippians 1:18).

### **Appendix C: The Correct Way to Reach a Postmodern World:**

One of the reasons that Rob Bell has risen to such popularity is because he professes to answer a question that has emerged in our history, and that is, how do we reach a “postmodern” world?

Postmodernism is in many ways a reaction against the “modern” way of thinking. Where a modernist sees the value of structure and hierarchy, a postmodernist holds to relativism and a rethinking of concepts which were once considered axiomatic.

Enter Rob Bell and teachers like him. They argue that the church is far too rigid, too dogmatic, too structured. Rob calls the church “brickianity.” And his solution is to redefine Christianity, to paint it as fluid and changeable. Rob uses the illustration of “springs” to convey the way we ought to view our Theology.

The bulk of this review has been critical of Rob Bell and his Theology, and so I believe it is appropriate to offer the proper alternative. Rob teaches that we ought to redefine Christianity to fit the worldview of the postmodern world. The postmodern world shuns structure and dogmatism, so teachers like Rob Bell tell us that the church ought to as well. This is evident all throughout *Velvet Elvis*, as documented in detail throughout this review.

So what is the proper way to reach the postmodern world? The answer is found in the Scriptures. Amazingly, the Scriptures really are in fact “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The world in Jesus’ day wasn’t all that different than how it is today. There truly is nothing new under the sun. And a group of undereducated Jewish men changed the world through preaching the cross. And the world can be changed today the exact same way.

How do you reach a postmodern world? The wrong way is to change the church to follow the culture, as Rob Bell does. The right way is to preach Christ and Him crucified.

An interesting thing happened to me when I became a Christian. I didn’t grow up in a Christian home - quite the contrary! I grew up in a liberal Jewish home, very hostile to the claims of Christianity. I was a young man who was very hesitant to even open a New Testament to read any portion of it.

But here’s what happened to me: God changed my heart. It’s that simple and that amazing. I was once dead in my transgressions, an enemy of God, but He reached out and rescued me and turned me into a child of God. And when that happened, all of a sudden my heart changed and I loved the things God loves and I hated the things God hates. I turned from my love for sin and instead I began to hunger for the Bible - even the New Testament! I couldn’t wait to attend church services and Bible studies and Christian retreats.

The difference was that God took out my old heart and gave me a new one. This is what happens when a man or woman repents of their sin and believes the gospel. They become a new creation.

It would have been disastrous if someone had come up to me and said, “Mark, we know you don’t like Jesus and don’t like the New Testament. That’s okay. God loves you just the way you are. You don’t need to repent or even put your faith in Christ. It’s okay. We have a church service, but we don’t call it *church*. We’ll call it a *gathering* and it’s run by *facilitators* instead of *Elders*.” That would have been terrible!

I didn’t need new definitions of Christianity. I needed a new heart. And when God gave me a new heart, then all of a sudden I didn’t mind conforming myself to the Bible, rather than conforming the Bible to me.

That’s what the postmodern world needs: the preaching of the cross. So Christian, if you’re reading this, and you have a hunger to reach the postmodern world, then preach the cross. Don’t change the church to conform to the culture. Preach the gospel, the whole gospel, because it is “it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Romans 1:16).

The preaching of the Word of God has always been the way God has changed hearts. It is still the only way He does it today. When people are reconciled to God, and they receive a new heart, the concerns of postmodernism become irrelevant.

## About the Author:

Mark Edward Sohmer has been a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ since September 25, 1993. He attends a Bible-believing church where he seeks to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). He loves God’s Word and is convinced that everything we need to know about God and salvation can be found there.

He is not a Pastor, nor a professional writer, though he is excited about God’s “good, and acceptable, and perfect” will for him, whatever that may be (Romans 12:2).

His personal testimony can be found at: <http://mystory.sohmer.net>.

He can be reached and welcomes comments, questions, and/or any correspondence:

