



Rob Bell “Undefines” Holiness

In *Velvet Elvis*, Bell lists a number of transcendent experiences that he claims overwhelmed him to be in awe of God. The first one for Bell happened as a teenager at a concert performed by Irish rock group U2, where he was “overwhelmed with the word *true*.”^[i] These extraordinary experiences he also describes as “holy” and “sacred.” The problem is that his usage has nothing to do with the Biblical meaning of the terms “holy” or “or sacred.”

The Bible uses the term “holy” to refer to God and whatever He sets apart for His purposes. In the Old Testament, for example, the Sabbath was “holy” because God had designated it as set apart for Him, using terminology like, “holy Sabbath to the Lord” (Exodus 16:23). Items for sacred use in the tabernacle were designated as “holy.” God is holy (Isaiah 6:3) and whatever things, places or people that God designates as holy are so because God declared them to be or caused them to be by some special action.

By definition, if something is holy it is separate from its opposite, the profane: *“Moreover, they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23)*. God’s holy name could be profaned, which is very sinful (Leviticus 22:32 and many other passages). Jerusalem is called the “holy city” in Old Testament and several times in gospels and Revelation.

In the New Testament, the term “holy” is not used to designate things or places other than usages that are tied to the Old Testament, such as the temple and its services mentioned in Acts and Hebrews. The scriptures are called both “holy” and “sacred” (*hieros* is used for “sacred” only once -- 2Timothy 3:15 “sacred Scriptures”; elsewhere it means temple or temple service). But this designation refers not to pages with ink on them per se, but to the content of the inspired writings. All other uses of “holy” have to do with the church: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the holy law, redeemed persons, faith, prayer, and our holy calling. The term under the New Covenant does not refer to things and places other than when referring to those so designated under the Old Covenant, like Jerusalem and the temple.

Therefore, under the New Covenant there are no holy things or places. A church building is not a sacred space. Hymnals, candles, pews, or a communion table (items that might be used in a church) are not holy. No ground or land is “holy” compared to other places (other than God’s continued plans for Israel, but that has to do with past promises and their fulfillment). No special location exists where one is going to meet God like Moses did at the burning bush. And one cannot go to a Christian store and buy a holy object. God makes people holy by redeeming them through the blood atonement and cleansing them from their sins. If someone meets God in a saving way, it will be because they heard and believed the gospel, not because of some “transcendent moment” like Bell describes.

For example, Bell describes a memorable meeting with some friends in a restaurant: “And I’m sitting in this restaurant looking around the table, soaking it in, totally overwhelmed with the holiness of it all. The sacredness of the moment.” [sic][ii] Bell then describes other experiences, such as being in a dirt-floored shack in Rwanda or at a funeral that he ends with “The ground was holy.”[iii] There was nothing uniquely Christian about any of the experiences he describes. He further describes conducting the wedding of a couple who wanted nothing to do with God, Jesus or the Bible. So they were married in a natural, beautiful place. Bell explained to them that whatever brought them together also holds all things together. They agreed to, “Call this glue, this force, ‘God.’”[iv] The resultant ceremony Bell describes as, “one of the most sacred things I have ever been a part of.”[v]

The problem here is that only Bell’s subjective impressions distinguish the holy and sacred. When Bell uses the term spiritual (which he also used to describe how the couple wanted the non-Christian wedding to be) he uses it in the secular manner as an Oprah Winfrey would use it. He justifies his use of the term by saying that “God is present” everywhere in the world.

However, the doctrine of God’s omnipresence does not imply that “everything is spiritual” or “everything is holy.” Bell over emphasizes God’s immanence in a way that is in danger of crossing over into panentheism. God must be understood to be transcendent over and separate from the creation. The Bible says that Jesus is “separated from sinners” (Hebrews 7:27), and that before conversion we were separate from Christ

and without God (Ephesians 2:12). Everything is not holy, everything is not sacred, and everything is not spiritual in the sense the Bible uses the terms. But Bell says that it is: “We throw ourselves into our work because everything is sacred.”[\[vi\]](#)

In my opinion, Bell is confusing common grace with saving grace. We can look at a sunset on a beautiful day and see that “the heavens declare the glory of God.” But the heavens speak this way to all people whether or not they recognize the true creator God. Paul says that this general revelation shows “God’s invisible attributes” (Romans 1:20). But Paul said that in the midst of a long litany about universal human sinfulness. Having a “transcendent moment” in which one realizes that some spiritual force exists that holds everything together, cannot save anyone and therefore cannot create holiness. Holiness only comes through the cleansing of the conscience by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 9:14). That only happens for those who repent and believe the gospel. Bell’s teaching obscures the difference between the holy and the profane. Common grace (that God shows kindness even to His enemies and sends rain on the just and unjust) does not create universal holiness.

To demonstrate how Bell confuses the Biblical idea of holiness, let me show you how he interprets the “holy ground” incident at the burning bush. Here is the *Velvet Elvis* version:

God tells Moses to take off his sandals, for the ground he is standing on is holy. Moses has been tending sheep in this region for forty years. How many times has he passed this spot? How many times has he stood in this exact place? And now God tells him the ground is holy? Has the ground been holy the whole time and Moses is just becoming aware of it for the first time? Do you and I walk on holy ground all the time, but we are moving so fast and returning so many calls and writing so many emails and having such long list to get done that we miss it?[\[vii\]](#)

In the context of this chapter Bell intends his readers to take these questions as rhetorical with the implied answer “yes.” But his exegesis of the Exodus account is inaccurate. He confuses general revelation with special revelation. At the burning bush Moses was the

recipient of special revelation. God's theophany made the ground holy compared to any other particular ground, not some heightened awareness on Moses' part. That God created the world can be seen through general revelation. That Moses was called by God to be the mediator of the Old Covenant could only be known by special revelation. Slowing down to figuratively "smell the roses" will not reveal "holy ground."

This is not the end of this serious category error. Using strange terminology about Jesus being the "life force" of nature and existence, Bell concludes that the wedding planners who did not want anything about Jesus or God are "resonating with Jesus whether they acknowledge it or not."[\[viii\]](#) He explains,

Jesus was up on that cliff with us that day. It is not that God is over here and real life is over there. If it is real, then it's showing us God. It is not that passion and love and exhilaration are in one place and Jesus is somewhere else. Where you find those, you are finding God.[\[ix\]](#)

These statements are false, because the Bible says that if we have not been made alive from the dead through a special work of grace through the gospel, we are "without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). God is not found on a cliff through resonating with nature and the "spiritual." He is found through faith in the finished work of Christ.

So, by broadening terms like, "holy, sacred, and spiritual," Bell has made them vacuous. His usage is not Biblical and implies a heightened sense of immanence at the expense of God's transcendence that is reminiscent of theological liberalism or panentheism. In the Bible, God's immanence and transcendence are both preserved: "*For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite"* (Isaiah 57:15). But we only experience God's holiness in a saving way by becoming repentant sinners who are "contrite and lowly in spirit." If we proudly go our own way and reject God's offer of salvation, the transcendent, Creator God will be our judge at the end of the age.

End Notes

[i] Rob Bell *Velvet Elvis – Rethinking the Christian Faith*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005) 72.

[ii] Ibid. 73.

[iii] Ibid. 74, 75.

[iv] Ibid. 77.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ibid. 84.

[vii] Ibid. 91.

[viii] Ibid. 92.

[ix] Ibid.

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