

EMERGENT SOTERIOLOGY: THE DARK SIDE

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Brian MacLaren typifies the dissatisfaction of the emergent over the format and praxis of modern churches. Such reactions ignore Psalm 1 in setting forth the source and impact of a proper worldview, a definitive conclusion about a proper worldview, and a formal approved conclusion as to a proper worldview. Though Emergent churches might identify themselves as evangelical, they still register dissatisfaction with the existing evangelical church, a dissatisfaction that spills over and affects emergent's doctrine of salvation. The language of Emergent churches ignores a number of traditional soteriological terms and redefines others. Emergent soteriology replaces biblical emphasis on a person's eternal destiny with emphasis on one's future condition and status in the present life, ignoring the impact of present behavior on future destiny. Because of selling short the words of Scripture, Emergent perspectives also are woefully errant in understanding the work of Christ on the cross. Emergents have revised the meaning of the well-known acrostic TULIP, depriving it of meanings given it in the Bible. They have an inclusivist view of the eternal destiny of the unsaved, leaning toward the position of universalism. Rather than following the worldview of Psalm 1, the movement has fallen into a pattern resulting from present-world philosophy.

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Timothy, the apostle Paul's young protégée, was to exercise discriminating judgment in order to know which were the strange doctrines to put down. His and Titus' shepherding task was to exhort to sound doctrine or healthy words and to refute those who contradicted such teaching (Titus 1:9). The immediate context emphasizes the necessity of this task undertaken by the elders. Many "must be silenced" or "whose mouths must be stopped" because their efforts were disturbing whole families, and doctrinal harmony was absent. The teacher, the refuter, the elder, is to hold fast the faithful word in accordance with the teaching he had received; otherwise he has no foundation by which to evaluate and judge the soundness of what he is hearing. That is hardly a gentle dialogue and friendly chat as though an equitable philosophical level prevails for all parties. Refuting those who are wrong is more than conversation or an enjoyable dialogue. Dialogue without the goal of placing the truth squarely on the table between the debaters accomplishes very little, for the one party retains an aberrant understanding. The elder's task is to refute those who contradict and not to try and learn something from them. His actions and speech should reveal his taking into account the charge from

the apostle to be kind and gentle and gracious in opposing error. Still, error has nothing to offer truth!

Brian McLaren, the influential writer and an initiator of the Emergent, affirms that sound doctrine is very important and adds that bad doctrine, though not the root of all evil, is a despicable accomplice to a good bit of evil in the world. Then he asks if there is any value in emphasizing doctrinal distinctives. In a note sounding like a contradiction, he observes that doctrinal distinctives are hazardous to spiritual health.¹ The Emergent is basically a reaction of dissatisfaction with the modern churches, their format, and praxis.

Reactions range from the mildly critical to a far more discontented hostility. Some of this comes from those who have had years of ministry behind them, but for some reason have evaluated the church and their ministries negatively. Exploring the reasons for that will have to be the subject of another essay.

When it comes down to life and death issues and religious ideals, man needs something objective coming from outside himself, since depending on his own heart and mind will prove to be most unreliable and definitely not immutable.

Humans are remarkably creative and eclectic in composing worldviews, with or without the Bible, which answer the question, "How then should one live?" Such worldviews treat also the riddle of existence, the problem of evil, origins and endpoints, the state of the world, and religious ideology.

The preface to the Psalter, namely Psalm 1, presents a meaningful worldview.² The three conclusions in this preface are (1) a lengthy, didactic conclusion which presents the source and impact of a meaningful worldview—vv. 1-3, (2) a terse and definitive conclusion which rejects all other options—v. 4, and (3) the formal 'approved' conclusion which demands that eternity be in one's worldview—vv. 5-6. The vocabulary leaves the reader with the distinct realization of what is the right source and what is the wrong source for his philosophy of life, or better, his *theology*. The blessed man does not follow the different system of worldly teaching and standards put forward by opponents of the LORD God. The ungodly, the sinner, and the scornful have nothing of value to offer. Instead, God has provided His Word for the believer to live by. The verbs, "walk, stand, and sit," in this context, together with the nouns, "counsel, path, seat," are clearly metaphors of pedagogy.³

The dark side represents those statements and conclusions which are not of sound doctrine. This essay intends only to highlight a selected number of statements from the many which caused a quizzical frowning of the brow, if not also a shake of the head.

Preliminary Acknowledgements

Those organizations and churches whose official statements of faith, or at least statements about the faith, would fit well within the parameters of

¹Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004) 195.

²The obvious breaks in the psalm are the dividing points: the emphasis of the phrase "not so," is shown by a repeat of that phrase to read as "not so the wicked not so!" [*lo' kēn*] in v. 4 and the "wherefore" [*'al kēn*] in v. 5, thus giving rise to three sections/conclusions.

³"Walk" is a well-known metaphor of a course taken in life, "stand" could describe one standing in a stream of thought, and "sit" being perhaps a valid metaphor for listening to lectures.

evangelicalism should be noted. One organization, Acts 29 Network, for example, in its short answer to a question on its beliefs and core values, introduced itself as being [1] Christian, [2] evangelical, [3] missional, and [4] Reformed. It declared itself to be in full agreement with the doctrinal statement of the National Association of Evangelicals. In spelling out its Reformed position, the depravity of man and the initiative of God in salvation are clearly presented. In its own words, “We believe that the salvation of the elect was accomplished by the sinless life, substitutionary atoning death and literal physical resurrection of Jesus Christ in place of His people for their sins.” Having spelled out the five parts of the acrostic, Acts 29 added about eighteen “we are not _____” propositional statements for further clarification of its doctrinal position. A sampling suffices:

- “We are *not liberals* who embrace culture without discernment and compromise the distinctives of the gospel, but rather Christians who believe the truths of the Bible are eternal and therefore fitting for every time, place, and people.”
- “We are *not moralists* seeking to help people live good lives, but instead evangelists laboring that people would become new creations in Christ.”
- “We are *not relativists* and do gladly embrace Scripture as our highest authority above such things as culture, experience, philosophy, and other forms of revelation.”
- “We are *not naturalists* and do believe that Satan and demons are real enemies at work in this world.”
- “We are *not universalists* and do believe that many will spend eternity in the torments of hell, as the Bible teaches.”

Authors who are respected are listed at the end of a document distinguishing Acts 29 Network from similar groups. Augustine, Calvin, Luther, the Puritans, Spurgeon, and Edwards are names from the past. Then names from the contemporary scene such as Grudem and Piper appear, but the list also includes Leslie Newbigin, missionary to India turned pluralist. The reader is hard-pressed to explain why this group, Acts 29 Network, considers itself doctrinally to be Emergent—it just does not seem to fit that label. This was an encouraging note in the midst of other literature on the phenomenon of the Emerging Church, or on postmodern theologies and influences on the church.⁴ Undoubtedly, statements of faith highly congruent with orthodox evangelicalism could very well be gracing the official documents of churches identifying themselves as part of the Emergent “conversation” or movement,⁵ for one reason or another, including some degree of disenchantment with existing churches and their practice.

The hallmark of those who write from within the Emergent circles appears to be a dissatisfaction with the existing evangelical church. Either it arose from

⁴The information given above was found at <http://www.acts29network.org/main.html>, accessed 11/14/2005, under “plant a church” and also under “FAQ.”

⁵Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 29; Gibbs and Bolger refer to it as a disparate movement, noting that it is very diverse and fragmented and that to insiders the term ‘conversation’ is preferable.

wrestling with a doctrine which was not palatable as traditionally taught, or more likely, it arose from the church's lack of serious engagement in social, political, and wider cultural issues of the day.⁶ Disillusionment set in.⁷

Were a sermon-like proposition to be crafted for this essay, it perhaps would be this: A fourfold redrafting⁸ of biblical teaching and doctrine is quickly discernible; a redrafting not done because in-depth exegesis has brought to the fore the need for a careful restatement which would act both as a purgative and a preservative, a purgative in that an accurate statement of doctrine would purge out false teaching and a preservative in that sound doctrine would be protected from corruption. False teaching here would include those cultural elements contrary to Christian principles, ethics, and moral standards. Frankly, one wonders why it would take "critical engagement" to identify what runs counter to the claims of Christ.⁹ Due recognition is given to those ethical issues which have arisen because of advances in medicine and science, but these would appear to be a-cultural matters which did not exist prior to the technical advance.

A thorough critique of every area of the emergent doctrine of salvation is not possible in a short essay. No apologies are offered for reacting primarily to Brian McLaren and his writings since he is obviously the most influential writer in the early years of the Emergent movement's development. A good critique of far more than the soteriological has already come from the pen of D. A. Carson,¹⁰ and reduplicating his thoughtful analysis and evaluation would be unnecessary.

A Redrafting of Salvation's Future Focus

Vocabulary Primer—An Aside

The changing world has produced a new language, so a primer helps the recently initiated understand the talk around them and to them. This primer, or glossary, did not provide any definitions or explanations of crucial soteriological terms. Justification, propitiation, redemption, reconciliation, and the atonement as well as sanctification, for some reason have been passed over in the book.¹¹

One entry did catch the eye: "L is for Lost." That's easy enough to understand in a biblical and Christian context where *lost* means unsaved and perishing. However, Christians with their undelivered message from their Lord are like a letter lost in the mail. A switch in meaning is proposed: the saved are the lost and those formerly lost are now the "people God treasures." Slackness in

⁶Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 17-19. Similar examples appear on various websites, e.g., Marcia Ford, <http://explorefaith.org/ford/emerging.html>, accessed 11/14/2005, in her article, "The Emerging Church: Ancient Faith for a Postmodern World," frankly acknowledges her increasing dissatisfaction with evangelicalism, not so much with its doctrine but with its practice.

⁷Ibid., 24.

⁸Using the participle to indicate that the theology is in the process of being formulated.

⁹Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 11.

¹⁰D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹¹Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 186-87.

evangelism means that “perhaps we would be wiser to refer to *ourselves* as the lost.”¹² The table of contents reveals that very few serious theological terms appear in this glossary.. The only ones noted were “Church,” “Eschaton,” “Evil,” “Grace,” “Holiness,” “Love,” “Spirituality,” and “Transcendent Immanence and Immanent Transcendence.”¹³ “Gospel,” “Good News,” “Salvation,” “Sin,” “Judgment and Wrath,” or “Sovereignty” are fellow absentees. Surely a changing paradigm and a new language, coupled with strong dissatisfaction and disappointment with the church, demand a reminder of those theological terms which *do not change*, regardless of the changing of worldviews and philosophies of men. The omission of such terms might suggest that their meanings are quite stable, as should be true of theological underpinnings, but that is not the case since a number have been redefined or restated. Pointing out the omission of terms in a glossary is a minor point, and appears to have little connection with salvation’s future focus. Nevertheless, it does raise an enquiry about how serious and crucial theological and biblical terms really are thought to be if they are left out of such a primer.

Present and Future

Culled from books, articles, and websites, a general description and summary of the understanding of the gospel and how it determines the believer’s focus on today and tomorrow would probably be worded something like the two paragraphs to follow. A kaleidoscope of observations!

Salvation is more than a rescue of one’s soul from hell after death by getting into heaven with one’s sins forgiven. In fact, since Jesus did not focus on the life after death, neither should the convert do so. The central focus of the believers’ thoughts is not the afterlife.¹⁴ The life being lived is for the here and now. Being born again and making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ is important for today, but is not to be relegated to an afterlife reality only. The gospel message, then, cannot be restricted to that which only gives an individual personal assurance of a destiny in heaven, even as it provides him with a testimony of specifically when (date, time, place) Christ was accepted as Savior.¹⁵ If *eternal life* in John’s Gospel

¹²Ibid., 186-87.

¹³Ibid, 7-8. Basically, modernity abandoned both immanence and transcendence, but with the waning of modernity’s influence the time has supposedly come to reclaim [or should it not be *re-proclaim?*] the reality of these two terms so that the Lord is “a God who is at once high and holy and near and dear” (286).

¹⁴Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 43; he lists thirteen bullet-points of the shifts that have occurred in the thinking of today, one of them being “from a theology that prepares people for death and the afterlife to a theology of life.” Others relevant to the doctrine of salvation are: “from propositional expressions of faith to relational stories about faith journeys,” “from the authority of Scripture alone to a harmony between the authority of Scripture and other personal ways God mysteriously and graciously speaks to Christians,” “from a personal, individualistic, private faith to harmony between personal and community faith,” and “from a search for dogmatic truth to a search for spiritual experience.” Each one deserves to be challenged doctrinally, but without these shifts being based upon the exegesis of key passages, then doctrinal certainty is sacrificed to contemporary cultural conditioning.

¹⁵Refer to the following : McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 100, and “Missing the Point: Salvation” in *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 28, and Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches* 54; Gibbs and Bolger remark, “Clearly, the gospel is not restricted to a message giving an individual assurance about eternal destiny.

refers to life in heaven after death, it has been wrongly interpreted.¹⁶ The restoration of all things and the salvation of the world, including both human and subhuman creation, is a much better topic of conversation than to talk of individual damnation and hell, for after all, God's frame of reference with regard to salvation is broader than first thought.¹⁷

The description of the "here and now" focus continues: Salvation is as much concerned with life before death as with life after death, and is the rescue of one from the fruitless ways of life today, of rescue from the cycle of violence [seen for example in the Pharisees versus Romans at the time of the Gospels], and of deliverance from a life of hatred and fear. It means that the convert becomes (1) a member of a new kind of people delivered from the guilt that drains life of its joys, (2) a new kind of people who live out love and justice in the world and who will create a good and beautiful world in accord with the concept of sharing in God's saving love for all creation, and (3) a participant in the adventure of the Kingdom of God, which Christ is establishing in the world on the earth within history—and it begins right now without waiting for the Second Coming, or some future apocalyptic events to occur.¹⁸ This kind of person would not have been told to give up this life and focus on salvation from hell after this life, but rather to make sure his theology does not aid and abet him in avoiding being involved in God's will being done on earth.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, with the present life dominating, the question about one's future shifts from inquiring after one's eternal destiny to asking about one's future condition and status while still alive on earth. The doctrine of the afterlife has changed to that of the present life. Thus, these two questions, "If you were to live for another fifty years, what kind of person would you like to become and how will you become that kind of person?" and "If Jesus doesn't return for ten thousand or ten million years, what kind of world do we want to create?" replace traditional evangelicalism's two well-known questions, "If you die tonight, do you know for certain that you will be with God in heaven?" and "If Jesus returned today, would you be ready to meet God?"²⁰

Feeling disoriented when trying to understand what is meant by "kingdom" is excusable since the adherents themselves are still struggling with the concept. For them, it's frustratingly fuzzy because they are working out the latest understandings

It is minimally that, but it is much more, being concerned as much with life before death as with life after death" (54).

¹⁶McLaren, *Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 150.

¹⁷Ibid., 103; also see Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 43, where another bullet-point of shifts states, "from a salvation of humanity to a salvation of all creation."

¹⁸See as partial sources for the generalized description given, Tony Campolo, "Missing the Point: Kingdom of God," in *Adventures* 43, and McLaren, *Last Word* 152, and *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), and *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

¹⁹Brian D. McLaren, "Missing the Point: Salvation," in *Adventures* 25-28; Tony Campolo, "Missing the Point: Kingdom of God," in *Adventures* 53, and "Missing the Point: Environmentalism," in *Adventures* 167-73

²⁰McLaren, *Last Word* 171.

of gospel and culture. The kingdom message reaches beyond the needs and desires of the individual to encompass the world Jesus came to save by turning it away from its rebellion. The good news presented by the emerging churches is wider than personal salvation. “It is social transformation arising from the presence and permeation of the reign of Christ.”²¹ A paradigm shift has apparently occurred, moving primary attention from church to kingdom.

Short Retort

The Christian involvement in and with the affairs of this world, while not totally avoided in evangelical churches, has not been without its disagreement, particularly as it relates to the level of its intensity and the nature of it. Dissatisfaction with the church of today has led, unfortunately, to a view of the gospel as concentrating solely on the hereafter to the total neglect of any and all responsibilities for the believer in today’s world. Cross-referencing to a small selection of those texts which do call on the believer to be looking into the future where he indeed already belongs is noticeably missing:

- Col 3:2-12, where Paul’s charge to the believers on the godly quality of life which they are to exhibit, is predicated upon Paul’s call for them to be heavenly minded.
- 2 Pet 3:11-13, where Peter advises his readers that the heavens and the earth will be destroyed, shows that this future reality as it concerns them will be seen in living sanctified lives, including looking for and hastening the Day of God, but also that looking for the new heavens and earth does impact the present day.
- Phil 3:13-14 where Paul explains the teleological nature of his demeanor in this life in graphically descriptive language, “forgetting . . . stretching forward . . . I press on . . . the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
- Mark 8:34-38, where Jesus called for self-denial on the part of His disciples and placed it within a pericope ending with the coming of the Son of Man.
- And a host of other passages which similarly tie the events of the future return of the Lord to the responsibilities of the present day—but never is this seen as a wrong focus for the believer to have. Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse” (John 13:31–16:33) and His “Upper Room Discourse” (Luke 22:14-28; Matt 26:20-29; Mark 14:17-25) intimate with clarity that He would be returning, which is His coming as the Son of Man in His glory.

Further, that good works are linked to salvation, as the aftermath, the natural outflow of its reality, is clearly indicated by Paul to the Ephesians when he stated that good works were part of what had been ordained beforehand (Eph 2:10). James’ understanding of faith and works should not be overlooked either (Jas 2:14-26). It is wrong, then, to suggest that in the system now set up, good works are seen as bad (implied that evangelicals have done this), as an enemy of believing, so that all that matters to evangelicals is believing the right things to enjoy that eternal life

²¹Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches* 63.

after death.²²

A Redrafting of the Savior's Perfect Sacrifice

It appears that when anything specific on the atonement was mentioned, the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Christ Jesus was overshadowed by the moral view of the atonement or by the *Christus Viktor* theory.

Sacrificial View Incomplete

A short note at the foot of a chart entitled "Christ in the Paradigms of History" advises that in a postmodern world, the first goal of an evangelical theology is to recognize that the sacrificial view of Christ's death is incomplete. The second goal is to reconnect with the biblical and historical witness to Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God in history. Then to acknowledge that by his death and glorious resurrection Christ has defeated the powers of evil, reconciled the world to God and established a new community, the church.²³ After concluding that theologies of redemption which do not go beyond the human race and incorporate the entire universe are inadequate, Robert Webber observes "that God in Christ is the cosmic-redeemer is a message pleasing to postmodern ears."²⁴

Sacrificial View Unacceptable

The nadir of redefining statements on the atonement is surely reached by one of the leaders of the movement in England, who stated unabashedly that the cross is not an instrument of cosmic child abuse, that is, a vengeful father punishing his innocent son for an offense he had not committed.²⁵ The words contradicted exactly what evangelicals with their shed blood and innocent lamb as the sacrificial victim are assumed to be portraying.

This is really the dark side! Even to tolerate such a statement without immediate strong negative reaction is alarming.

Supposedly, folks both inside and outside the church have found this concept of an innocent victim as a penal substitute a huge barrier to faith. The same writer observes that such a twisted and morally dubious view of the atonement is totally contradictory to the declaration "God is love." Moreover, "if the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil."²⁶

Tomlinson, author of *The Post Evangelical*, speaks of the atonement by

²²McLaren, *Last Word* 150.

²³Ibid., 67.

²⁴Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 66-67, who concurred with Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 46.

²⁵Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 182, whose book was endorsed by McLaren, N. T. Wright, and Tony Campolo despite its horrendous caricature of the gospel; see also comments by D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant* 182-85, who forthrightly concluded that McLaren and Chalke had largely abandoned the gospel.

²⁶Ibid., 182-83.

observing: (1) that it validly holds central place in Christianity, (2) that various models are used to aid in understanding it, (3) that the vast majority of evangelicals understand the atonement as substitutionary, and (4) that many people question this interpretation of Christ's death.²⁷ He points to a Don Cupitt who does not want such a fickle, vengeful, and morally underhanded God as seen in the legal or substitutionary theory of the atonement.²⁸ Tomlinson points to Stephen Ross White's alternative interpretation that the atonement is about how man's attitude toward God changes when he sees so graphically acted out before him God accepting and forgiving the worst that could be flung at Him by humans, namely the killing of His beloved Son.²⁹

Not all that surprising, McLaren himself asks why the penal substitutionary theory requires suffering on the part of an innocent substitute to bring about forgiveness of sins. He, that is Dan Poole, the fictionalized McLaren in the story, accepts what is called "the powerful weakness theory." That new idea sees Jesus becoming vulnerable on the cross and accepting suffering *from* every one, Jew and Roman, and not visiting suffering *on* everyone in some sort of revenge. It puts on display God's loving heart which wants forgiveness, not vengeance. The idea is about suffering and transforming it into reconciliation, and not avenging it through retaliation. God rejects the violence, dominance, and oppression which have so gripped the world from the time of Cain and Abel until today's news headlines. The call of the cross is for mankind not to make the Kingdom come about through coercion but "to welcome it through self sacrifice and vulnerability."³⁰

A privately held theory is derived from another character in the book, Neo. His painful marital experience is explained in terms of God's agony being made visible—the pain of forgiving and of absorbing the betrayal and foregoing any revenge, of risking for the sake of love, of being hurt again. Neo informs the other that for him nails, thorns, sweat, blood, and tears embody the only true language of betrayal and forgiveness.³¹

Short Retort

One asks in vain: Where are the biblical texts supporting such explanations? Are not personal experiences, feelings, and preferences, as well as audience reactions and preferences, influencing formulation of the different models? The motivation for changing the theory/model of the atonement is the fact that many Christians who have tried to share their faith have had to face similar accusations against God.³² Unbelievers' views of God, the cross, and the Christ are not hermeneutically determinative in the study of God's revealed Word. Nor is it a case of critical realism versus naive realism and the problems that the former raises with regard to

²⁷Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 100-101.

²⁸Ibid., 101.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰McLaren, *The Story* 105-6.

³¹Ibid., 107.

³²Tomlinson, *Post-Evangelical* 101.

the substitutionary model.³³

Though alternative theories/models may not be stated blatantly, the story does demonstrate a rejection of the words of the text. And this despite an acknowledgment of the substitutionary model in taking the text literally and not purely metaphorically.³⁴ What is so wrong with accepting the plain sense of all the passages on the substitutionary death of Christ? Frankly, whether postmodern minds accept it or not is unimportant. That the substitutionary nature is taught by Scripture is important. As Carson noted in his response to McLaren, “Nowhere in his writings (fictional and non-fictional) does he attempt to ground his treatment of theories of the atonement in the Bible, and . . . he invariably takes the time to take cheap shots at substitution and other elements taught in Scripture.”³⁵

A Redrafting of Salvation's Well-known Acrostic

Firmly ensconced in theological thinking is that most recognizable of acrostics, TULIP, which McLaren proposes should be “slightly revised.” His revision turns out to be far from slight; it is a substantial overhaul, retaining practically nothing of the original.

Old Letters, New Content

The well-known acrostic stands for [1] Total Depravity, [2] Unconditional Election, [3] Limited Atonement, [4] Irresistible Grace, and [5] Perseverance of the Saints. Despite differences, debates, and arguments surrounding the five headings, the acrostic still stands as a good summary of the five major points relevant to soteriology. The new TULIP for McLaren stands for [1] Triune Love, [2] Unselfish election, [3] Limitless reconciliation, [4] Inspiring grace, and [5] Passionate, persistent saints.³⁶ The details of each may be summarized as follows:

- *Triune love*: a better expression of the relationship of God to His creation than the use of the attribute of sovereignty or the divine judge metaphor. When these two predominate, left in their wake is either legal prosecution or absolute control, but what should be affirmed and not kept hidden is love being the fundamental essence of God's being. That the wrath of God is overshadowed by the love of God is not a new idea. Divine love was exalted as *the* governing attribute of the Godhead.
- *Unselfish election*: better than proclaiming unconditional election, which is immediately dumped at the theological wayside by referring to it as that most stubborn heresy in the history of monotheism. Rather, election is to be seen as a divine gift given to some for the benefit of all others.
- *Limitless reconciliation*: better than a focus on the restricted scope of the atonement is a concentration on the *missio dei* of relational reconciliation. In this, always praying to be forgiven by God as one forgives others, and

³³Ibid., 99-100, where the sectional heading is “Critical Realism Trumps the Naive.”

³⁴Ibid., 101.

³⁵Carson, *Becoming Conversant* 168.

³⁶McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 195-97.

- always loving God and neighbor.
- *Inspiring grace*: better than portraying it mechanistically as an irresistible force. Freely and fully benefiting from God's grace, should inspire one to extend freely such grace to all others—yielding a truly generous orthodoxy!
 - *Passionate, persistent saints*: better than a display of something being grimly endured, the saints display unquestionable hope and are untiring in their efforts to live and share the gospel.

Short Retort

McLaren's TULIP is definitely not a slight revision; that is quite a *misnomer*. Of course, McLaren or anyone else may take an acrostic already in use to enhance an explanation of some concept his hearers need to remember or to bring the acrostic more fully in line with the testimony of Scripture as one sees it. Any mnemonic device has pedagogical value, is definitely not inspired, and is open to use or abuse. In a context critical of Reformed theology and a motivation for the revised acrostic to reform Reformed Christians, the total redrafting of such a well-known acrostic signals, at the very least, some discomfort with the original content of the acrostic.

A few observations and queries are in order:

- Nothing is achieved by leaving aside the sinfulness of fallen man. Indeed, what theological purpose is served by leaving out the reason for both eternal damnation and salvation? Did not Jesus Himself clearly assert that people are evil (see Matt 7:11; Mark 7:21-23)? Since He said so, should not the theologian maintain the same position?
- The rich and varied vocabulary pointing to election is recorded so unmistakably in the NT Gospels and epistles in soteriological contexts that it often calls forth explanation and reaction. That is understandable. Declaring election a heresy is a conclusion, not the result of exegetical study.
- Unselfish election, an unusual phrase, means exactly what? Is there a reaction to the term "unconditional"? The substitution removes the unacceptable term "unconditional."
- Worthy of consideration would be Alva McClain's thoughtful comment: "If you are saved you dare not take credit to yourself, if you are lost you alone are responsible."³⁷
- Grace is certainly a grand subject on the pages of Scripture, and the cry *sola gratia* is worthy of reiteration in every generation, and, yes, it may even be inspiring as one reflects on what the God of all grace has done.
- The perseverance of the saints is hardly to be seen as an exercise in grimly enduring to the end. Is there no joy of the Lord even for those who persevere when all of life's circumstances would appear to suggest, from the world's perspective, that one's faith has been misplaced? Surely, the persevering saint is looking to glory in order to keep the events of this life in proper perspective?

³⁷Alva J. McClain, "Doctrine of Election," unpublished notes in the syllabus, "Christian Salvation," Grace Theological Seminary, n.d., n.p.

Redrafting the Unsaved's Final Destiny

With regard to terms such as “inclusivism, exclusivism, universalism, conditionalism, and questions concerning hell, they can so easily become “weapons of mass distraction?”³⁸ With respect to sermons such as Jonathan Edwards’ famous one, “Sinners in the hands of an angry God,” McLaren raises the question as to whether or not that sermon helped or hurt the evangelical cause, since the conventional view it espoused fosters having a deity with some sociopathic disorder?³⁹

Emotive Language

Unfortunately, sarcastic observations burst forth, noting that to spurn God’s love and plan for one’s life is to have Him torture the rejecter with unimaginable abuse forever. The selection of the term “abuse” stirs up unfavorable reaction toward this kind of deity. This picture of an everlasting torturer demands therefore some amendment, for it is offensive to the hearer and might even be embarrassing to the presenter. Theologians and preachers have backed off from saying too much too strongly about eternal damnation, because it is not accepted by today’s audiences. “Perhaps intuitively, we have known . . . that something is wrong and so we’ve backed off until we figure out the problem—or until some foolhardy person ventures to do so for us”⁴⁰

A new interpretation is needed since the conventional and traditional is not sufficient to satisfy all questions about God and His doings. With some exaggeration, perhaps, millions have given up on Christianity because the textual data is unacceptable as it stands. Polarity governs the debate. Either it is a just God without mercy for all or a merciful God without justice for all. Changing the understanding to read, “God’s justice is always merciful and God’s mercy is always just” is thought to ameliorate the deep misunderstandings about the justice, purpose, and person of God.

That Jesus said much on hell is undeniable, but it is not considered beyond amendment. The rhetorical points made by Christ are not saying what Westerners think they are saying, but (1) are turning the Pharisees’ concepts on its head, (2) are stating what is of real interest to God, and (3) are treating His words as metaphorical motivators.⁴¹ A thirty-two point listing of notes and quotes on hell from a wide variety of sources, does not bring any level of settlement to the debate, but it does show that those who cannot accept the factuality of hell have determined in advance that the passage cannot be saying what it says, either because it is incompatible with God’s mercy and love which simply could not afflict infinite punishment for finite wrong, or because the Bible is sufficiently ambivalent on this matter, so that if any end up there, it is certainly not God’s choice or lack thereof but the impenitent’s own decision.⁴² After examining judgment passages in the Gospels for their rhetorical purpose, McLaren concluded that the modern Western use of hell is assessed to be far different from Jesus’ use of it. That God did not affirm holding to the right

³⁸McLaren, , *Generous Orthodoxy* 37.

³⁹McLaren, *Last Word* xii.

⁴⁰Ibid., xiii.

⁴¹Ibid., 69-81, 121.

⁴²Ibid., 97-98, 102, and the four-column chart, 115-20.

beliefs or doctrine with regard to not entering hell, but instead was concerned about what people do here and now, is of import.⁴³

Inclusivism Endorsed

Inclusivism is preferred over exclusivism, with conditionalism as the fall-back position. Of course, conditionalism means annihilationism, which means hell brings about extinction, not eternal torment. Universalism may be the final fall-back for those struggling with anyone being cast into hell forever, or even cast in for a transient flare of flame, a flash and forever non-existent. The words of Paul, “those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8:14) keeps open the back door for inclusivism.⁴⁴

Short Retort

The Bible is seen to be “horribly disappointing as a modern-style technical textbook, even for theology.”⁴⁵ One wonders whether in consequence a hermeneutical fluidity will be permitted. Further, just how rhetorical purpose results in a change of the conception of hell remains unclear. The conclusion is faulty anyway. Having the right belief is crucially important, and what one does is also of import, but the deeds do not save from hell. Was this perhaps being implied, although remaining unsaid?

Consideration must be given to the attributes of God and the following statement thereon: All God’s acts are acts of righteousness and holiness, but not all are acts of unrestricted divine love and mercy. The language of eternity and judgment (retributive, not rehabilitative) attests to the irreversible nature of the final state for the unbeliever in Revelation 14 and 20. No less clear are the statements made by Christ in the Gospels and by Paul in his epistles.⁴⁶

Acknowledgement of perfection and trueness in God’s attributes rules out speaking of divine vengeance and wrath in terms of human vindictiveness and sinful anger. The holy, just, and sovereign Lord does not act with malice aforethought. That is an illegitimate portrayal of Him!

The seven-page, thirty-two-point listing of Scripture references and observations on hell, portrays what happens when personal ideals or desires are brought to bear upon texts.

Concluding Comments

In every age the truth God as revealed in His Word has been challenged, resisted, and redefined to be more acceptable and palatable, to place it more in accord with the ideas, desires, and thoughts of the recipients. Atonement, election, eternal torment, and the details of TULIP have received their fair share of attention, and have been endorsed, questioned, and qualified, but the doctrines covered by that acrostic cannot be left out of the equation.

⁴³Ibid., 115-20, the four columns being headed “Passage, Behavior, Consequence, and Point.”

⁴⁴Ibid., 7, called a secret because his friends, family, colleagues, and church attendees thought he was an exclusivist.

⁴⁵Ibid., 99, and for the complete listing, 96-103.

⁴⁶See the five articles in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9/22 (Fall 1998) for a bevy of information, exegetical facts, and bibliography on eternal punishment and the reality of hell. Those articles sufficiently respond to both the listing on notes and quotes and the chart of rhetorical purpose.

Although not throwing out all philosophy as harmful to the theologian, one would not be wrong to observe that the simple answer for the believer who faces such an array of ideas in his time is Rom 12:2: be transformed by the renewing of the mind, regardless of the philosophy or the domineering worldview of the majority. The prohibition equally weighing in with its caution is “and do not be conformed to the world.”

Psalm 1 steps forward and stands center stage as a reminder that the source of a meaningful worldview is that in which the believer is to delight, namely the Word of God. The worldview of the believer is to come from the words of Him who knows all things and works all things out according to the counsel of His will. It does not stem from the teaching of the ungodly, the sinner, or the scornful, all of whom are opponents of truth.

Paul's words to the Colossians, who would one day soon face the overwhelming presence of Gnosticism, stand as a sentinel, with the warning, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8).

Emerging churches cannot avoid their pastoral responsibility “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 4). Statements on the doctrine of salvation which belong to sound doctrine are commendable, but that which is a contradiction, redefinition, or total reworking in those areas noted above, must be regarded as “strange doctrines” with which none should be enamored. One writer concluded his brief article by writing, “if [the Emerging church] continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷Don Closson, “The Emerging Church,” at http://www.probe.org/index2.pp?com_content&task=view&id=1279&Itemid=77, accessed 1/27/2006.