

## **THE EMERGING CHURCH: GENEROUS ORTHODOXY OR GENERAL OBFUSCATION?**

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*Brian McLaren, though not speaking officially for all who identify with the “emergent movement,” nonetheless has become the most visible and widely-read proponent. Therefore, a review of his signature volume, A Generous Orthodoxy, serves to identify representative features of this recent religious phenomenon. The central question to be addressed must be, “Is it of God or is it of man?” Five significant characteristics of McLaren’s “conversation” lead this reviewer to conclude the latter, not the former. These qualities include: (1) An Eclectic Church; (2) An Ecumenical Church; (3) An Earthbound Church; (4) A Scripture-Doubting Church; and (5) A Resisting-Biblical-Authority Church. Therefore, the Emerging Church Movement should be rejected as another failed attempt (no matter how sincere or learned) to improve on “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).*

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### **An Introductory Word**

Three of Rudyard Kipling’s six honest serving-men will facilitate introducing the subject at hand. WHO is Brian McLaren? WHY review *A Generous Orthodoxy*? And WHAT is the “emerging church”?

#### **Brian D. McLaren**

Brian D. McLaren is “a pastor, author, speaker, and networker among

innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists.”<sup>1</sup> This fifty-year-old author holds two degrees from the University of Maryland in English (B.A. [1978]; M.A. [1981]) and has academic interests in medieval drama, romantic poets, modern philosophical literature, and the novels of Dr. Walker Percy. While teaching college-level English (1978–1986), he helped form a nondenominational church in the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area (1982) and served as the senior pastor for twenty-one years (1986-2006).

McLaren, an avid reader, has blossomed into a prolific contributor to/author of at least eleven volumes since 1998. His publishers have been Jossey-Bass, W Publishing Group, and Zondervan. Books of significance include *Reinventing Your Church*, Zondervan, 1998 (revised and republished as *The Church on the Other Side* in 2000), *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan, 2004, and *The Secret Message of Jesus*, W Publishing Group, 2006.

A short, but insightful, autobiographical window into his lifelong spiritual journey aids the reader in understanding that McLaren’s pilgrimage began at birth, has taken a multitude of varying directions, and the final pathway is still unsure.<sup>2</sup> He is frequently self-deprecating (18, 22, 24, 34, 115) and on more than one occasion acknowledges (brags about?) his lack of theological training and/or skill (20–21, 34, 156–57). Several of his significant spiritual heroes/mentors include Barth (151-52), Bosch (255-56), Brueggman (145), Chesterton (17, 149, 186, 222), Frei (23-24), Newbigin (110), and Wright (18, 86).<sup>3</sup>

### ***A Generous Orthodoxy***

Next, WHY review *A Generous Orthodoxy*? First, because this is the “personal confession”<sup>4</sup> of the most visible, most respected, and most prolific author representing the emerging church movement. Second, because McLaren labels his volume as “a manifesto” of the emerging church conversation. Therefore, it would border on negligence not to review a book promoted at this level of potential importance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This autobiographical material has been excerpted from <http://www.brianmclaren.net/biography.html>, accessed 9/26/06.

<sup>2</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 20-21, a work hereafter designated by “AGO.”

<sup>3</sup>McLaren’s appreciation for/dependence on these men receives further reinforcement in R. Alan Street, ed., “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3/2 (Spring 2006):5-14.

<sup>4</sup>Words from McLaren’s autobiography ([www.brianmclaren.net/biography.html](http://www.brianmclaren.net/biography.html), accessed 9/26/06).

<sup>5</sup>Two significant critiques of the emerging church movement in general are D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2005). Smith deals with McLaren specifically on pages 50-66. Reviews of *AGO* include: John M. Frame, “Review of Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*,” *Act 3 Review* 14/3 (2005):97-105; Albert Mohler, “‘A Generous Orthodoxy’—Is It Orthodox?” Online at <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/1313087.html> (2/16/05), accessed 9/26/06; Tim Challies, “Book Review – A Generous

The appealing title, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, subtly captures one's attention and imagination. But what was its origin and what does it mean? The phrase "generous orthodoxy" was coined by Hans Frei (Yale University) in a 1987 written response to C. F. H. Henry's lecture calling into question the adequacy of narrative theology.<sup>6</sup> Frei further described this kind of orthodoxy as that "which would have in it an element of liberalism . . . and an element of evangelicalism. . . ."<sup>7</sup> The outgoing president of Princeton Seminary later elaborated on Frei's concept in his farewell remarks to the graduating class of 1995.<sup>8</sup> By this term, he meant a "liberal" orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> Stanley Grenz renewed the call for this same type of generous orthodoxy in 2000.<sup>10</sup> McLaren credits Grenz for drawing his attention to the expression.<sup>11</sup> To McLaren, the emphasis is not on "orthodoxy" because (in his own words) he does not want to engage in "nauseating arguments" over right and wrong. Rather, the important word is "generous," in the spirit of Frei's sense of the word.<sup>12</sup>

### Emerging Church

Finally, WHAT is the "emerging church"? For McLaren, the idea of "emerging" or "emergent" has its roots (no pun intended) in the vocabulary of rainforest ecology.<sup>13</sup> *Emergents* are small saplings that grow up in the shadow of the mature forest canopy, waiting to soar up and fill the gap vacated by a dying tree.<sup>14</sup>

So he concludes, "[A] generous orthodoxy is an emerging orthodoxy, never complete until we arrive at our final home in God."<sup>15</sup> As he frequently does, McLaren has defined or reasoned by analogy, not Scripture. Thus, the idea of "emerging" by McLaren's explanation still seems somewhat vague and ill-defined.

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Orthodoxy," Online at <http://www.challies.com/archives/000712.php> (12/30/04), accessed 9/ 27/05.

<sup>6</sup>Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology': An Evangelical Appraisal" *TrinJ* 8 (Spring 1987):21-24.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 21. See the posthumously published volume by Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas W. Gillespie, "A Generous Orthodoxy," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 16/3 (1995):268-71.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>10</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 325, 331.

<sup>11</sup>McLaren, *AGO* 23.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 19, 23. Interestingly, John R. Franke picks up on this theme in his "Foreword" to *AGO* 9.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 275-76.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 285. Two years later in Street, "An Interview" 5, McLaren says, "the emerging church" is really "the church that is engaging with the emerging culture." This is a vivid example of McLaren's extremely fluid thinking.

McLaren, along with Leonard Sweet and Jerry Haselmayer, prepared a dictionary of “emerging” words.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this volume will help to bring into focus what is not altogether clear in *AGO*. The entry for “Emergence” lists two key components—(1) “We make it up as we go along” and (2) “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”<sup>17</sup> The term remains somewhat vague and ill-defined.

This next definition seems to cut through the fog somewhat, “The Emerging Church is . . . a particular subset of Christians who are rethinking Christianity against the backdrop of Postmodernism.”<sup>18</sup> Whatever the definition, one can be certain that it has no biblical point of reference, but rather is a reshaping of someone’s thinking/worldview by the prevailing cultural bent and/or preferred school of philosophy.

How does the idea of emergence/emergent/emerging relate to the biblical concept of church (ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia*). One would not know from *AGO*. Even though the word for “church/churches” appears at least 100 times in the NT, McLaren never once refers to the biblical concept of church by Scripture reference,<sup>19</sup> much less does he offer a serious discussion.

This introduction evidences that a great deal can be known about Brian D. McLaren and *AGO*. On the other hand, the precise concept of an “emerging church” was not clearly explained by his discussions of “emerging” and/or of “church.” Thus, the reviewer and the reader will have to sample what he means by what he discusses in twenty chapters concerning this elusive topic, and then draw some conclusions.

### **Five Characteristics of McLaren’s Emerging Church**

The author did not carefully or clearly define “emerging church.” However, this reviewer has identified five distinctive characteristics of the Emerging

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<sup>16</sup>*A Is For Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 107-8. The reviewer did not make this up.

<sup>18</sup>Online at [http://members.tripod.com/carla\\_b/emergentmovement/whatisemergent.html](http://members.tripod.com/carla_b/emergentmovement/whatisemergent.html), accessed 9/27/06.

<sup>19</sup>McLaren seems to be unaware of or uninterested in serious volumes on the church that target a biblical understanding, e.g., Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1974); Alfred F. Kuen, *I Will Build My Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1971); John MacArthur, *The Body Dynamic* (Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor, 1996); Richard Mayhue, *What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002); Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church Is All About: A Biblical and Historical Study* (Chicago: Moody, 1978). He even appears to ignore major volumes that have taken a pragmatic (in contrast to theological) approach to the church, such as George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word, 1998); Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

Church which practices a generous orthodoxy as envisioned by McLaren.<sup>20</sup> These distinctive marks will help to define “emerging church” functionally.

### **An Eclectic Church**

The first not-so-subtle hint that the emerging church is like a patchwork quilt comes from reading the book cover and the contents page. McLaren claims some level of identity with evangelicals, Protestants, liberals, conservatives, charismatics, fundamentalists, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics. He clearly serves with the band of philosophers who select from various schools of thought such doctrines as please them—i.e., the eclectics—not necessarily from those which reflect the truth of God’s Word.

If this is not enough, he speaks of “The Seven Jesuses I Have Known” in Chapter 1. These include Conservative Protestant, Pentecostal/Charismatic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Liberal Protestant, Anabaptist, and Liberation Movement. He suggests that more could be added.<sup>21</sup> And then he inquires, “Why not celebrate them all?”<sup>22</sup>

It appears that McLaren has designed his own version of Christianity in general and of Jesus in particular by picking and choosing what he likes from among what he dislikes. Thus, his emerging church results from a set of highly subjective choices which are determined by him. With his own mind and in his own language, he creates his own brand of religion. By his own admission, the author warns that “The book is absurd because it advocates an orthodoxy that next to no one holds, at least not so far.”<sup>23</sup>

Lest someone accuse this reviewer of misunderstanding and/or misrepresenting McLaren, let McLaren make the point.

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<sup>20</sup>Other significant analyses of the Emerging Church Movement include Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/011/12.36.html> (10/22/04), accessed 9/26/06; Albert James Dager, “The Emergent Church: A New Path to Ancient Religion,” *Media Spotlight* 28/4 (Fall 2005):1, 3, 8ff; Gary E. Gilley “The Challenge of the Emerging Church,” *The Quarterly Journal* 26/2 (April -June 2006):1, 17ff; Gilley, “The Emerging Church,” Parts II & III, *Think On These Things* (May 2006 & June 2006); Jeffrey Jue, “What’s Emerging in the Church?” *Reformation* 21, [http://www.reformation21.org/Front\\_Desk/September\\_2005\\_Feature\\_/82](http://www.reformation21.org/Front_Desk/September_2005_Feature_/82).(September 2005), accessed 9/26/06; James King, “Emerging Issues for the Emerging Church,” *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* (Fall 2005):24-62.

Compare the profile of “the first church” at Jerusalem, which differs dramatically from the one McLaren proposes (Mayhue, *What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?* 181-94).

<sup>21</sup>AGO 65.

<sup>22</sup>AGO 66.

<sup>23</sup>AGO 27.

The approach you'll find here . . . seeks to find a way to embrace the good in many traditions and historic streams of Christian faith, and to integrate them, yielding a new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly, Paul must have intended Timothy and all succeeding generations to do just the opposite.

[A]nd what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2).

### **An Ecumenical Church**

One of McLaren's mentors, Lesslie Newbigin was quite active in the World Council of Churches and an innovative thinker in the international ecumenical movement. In *AGO*, he gives tribute to Newbigin by acknowledging that he was one of the theologians who helped him most.<sup>25</sup> John Franke also approvingly quotes Newbigin in his "Foreword" to *AGO*.

Second, the centrality of Christ is combined with openness appropriate for generous orthodoxy. For instance, the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the unique Savior and hope of the world does not demand a restrictive posture concerning salvation for those who have never heard the gospel or those in other religious traditions. Brian addresses the questions in this area that many Christians wrestle with and suggests that these need not be finally closed, but may remain open to hopeful engagement without undermining or compromising the importance of Christian witness and responsibility. His discussion follows in the spirit of the influential missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin who articulated his own position concerning Christ and salvation along the following lines: exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but not in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation to those outside the Christian faith; inclusive in the sense of refusing to limit the saving grace of God to Christians, but not in the sense of viewing other religions as salvific; pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but not in the sense of denying the unique and decisive nature of what God has done in Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Ecumenism by common dictionary definition involves seeking worldwide Christian unity that transcends or minimizes doctrinal differences. The following sample of quotes from *AGO* illustrates that McLaren is leading the "emerging church" by following in the ecumenical footsteps of Newbigin.

To add insult to injury, nearly all orthodoxies of Christian history have shown a pervasive disdain for other religions of the world: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism,

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<sup>24</sup>*AGO* 18.

<sup>25</sup>*AGO* 100.

<sup>26</sup>*AGO* 12–13; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 182–83.

atheism, etc. A generous orthodoxy of the kind explored in this book, while never pitching its tent in the valley of relativism, nevertheless seeks to see members of other religions and non-religions not as enemies but as beloved neighbors, and whenever possible, as dialogue partners and even collaborators.<sup>27</sup>

The Christian faith, I am proposing, should become (in the name of Jesus Christ) a welcome friend to other religions of the world, not a threat. We should be seen as a protector of their heritages, a defender against common enemies, not one of the enemies. Just as Jesus came originally not to destroy the law but to fulfill it, not to condemn people but to save them, I believe he comes today not to destroy or condemn anything (anything but evil) but to redeem and save everything that can be redeemed or saved.<sup>28</sup>

McLaren's conversational partners have not only heard but have accepted his influence to engage in ecumenism to the fullest, as evidenced by this broad statement of purpose:

We are committed to honor and serve the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal. We practice “deep ecclesiology”—rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential.

We believe the rampant injustice and sin in our world requires the sincere, collaborative, and whole-hearted response of all Christians in all denominations, from the most historic and hierarchical, through the mid-range of local and congregational churches, to the most spontaneous and informal expressions. We affirm both the value of strengthening, renewing, and transitioning existing churches and organizations, and the need for planting, resourcing, and coaching new ones of many kinds.

We seek to be irenic and inclusive of all our Christian sisters and brothers, rather than elitist and critical, seeing “us” we were used to see “us versus them.” We own the many failures of the church as our failures, which humbles us and calls us to repentance, and we also celebrate the many heroes and virtues of the church, which inspires us and gives us hope.<sup>29</sup>

Let the reviewer simply comment that this was not the approach taken by the Lord of the church in His seven last letters (Revelation 2–3), nor is it His response to Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem (e.g., Matt 21:12-13; 23:1-36; John 2:13-17; 8:39-47).

### **An Earthbound Church**

The emerging church as conceived by McLaren in *AGO* is more defined by a personal pilgrimage than it is by God's revelation in Scripture. It is more about

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<sup>27</sup>*AGO* 35.

<sup>28</sup>*AGO* 254.

<sup>29</sup>Online at [http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values\\_and\\_practices](http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values_and_practices), accessed on 9/26/06.

individual or group anthropology than theology. Just examine McLaren's chapter titles; seventeen out of twenty contain the pronoun "I."

In his discussion of "missional," he concludes that Christian endeavors are "for the *good* of the world,"<sup>30</sup> though Scripture teaches that all things are to be done for the glory of God (Ps 86:12; 1 Cor 10:31). His is too much a man-centered church.<sup>31</sup> He is attempting to reverse the irreversible.

Even more alarming is the theme found throughout *AGO* that the Emerging Church has been rooted in the philosophical soil of postmodernism. McLaren once explained the origins of his fascination with postmodernism.

I snuck into pastoral ministry via the English department rather than the theology department. I wasn't planning on being a pastor, but you know how these things go. There was a moment in graduate school (it was the late '70s) that I won't forget. Not the moment one of my freshman comp students (I had a teaching fellowship) told me he had trouble with spelling, so he wanted to turn in his composition assignments on cassette tape instead of on paper.

No, it was the moment I "got it" regarding a strange new school of literary theory, then associated with the terms "post-structuralism" and "deconstruction." A chill ran up my neck, and two thoughts seized me:

1. *If this way of thinking catches on, the whole world will change.*
2. *If this way of thinking catches on, the Christian faith as we know it is in a heap of trouble.*

I couldn't have articulated why these thoughts so gripped me back then, but my intuition was right, I think. I was "getting" some facet of what we now term "postmodernism," a way of thinking that has both continuities and discontinuities with the modernity from which it grows, in which it is rooted, and against which (perhaps like a teenager coming of age) it reacts.<sup>32</sup>

Just at the time that non-Christian educators/philosophers are having severe second thoughts about the validity of postmodern thought,<sup>33</sup> McLaren and those who identify with him and those with whom he identifies are promoting it as though philosophy, not theology, should drive Christian thought.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*AGO* 107.

<sup>31</sup>See Richard Mayhue, *Seeking God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000) 227-33, for an expanded discussion concerning the scriptural teaching about God's glory.

<sup>32</sup>Brian D. McLaren, "Emerging Values," Online at <http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2003/summer/3.34.html>, accessed 9/27/06.

<sup>33</sup>Jennifer Howard, "The Fragmentation of Literary Theory," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 16, 2005):A12-A16.

<sup>34</sup>See Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001). For a more biblical assessment, see Steve Comell, "A Strange Postmodern World," *VOICE* (January February 2006):18-20; Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).



Philosopher R. Scott Smith, who is not altogether unsympathetic with McLaren's writings, nevertheless notes,

And, if we do not embrace postmodernism as a new way of being a Christian, it does not follow that we will end up with a God who has been shrunken to modern tastes, which McLaren says will not appeal to postmodern people. That fear is simply misplaced. I think he has in part misdiagnosed the cause of the problems he addresses, and therefore he has misprescribed the solution. . . . Where I think McLaren does his readers a disservice is that he never mentions any concerns with what the constructivist views of such writers imply, or what such views might do to the faith, if we truly recast Christianity itself in a postmodern way of thinking.<sup>35</sup>

John Piper adds this notable contemporary commentary on the postmodernism that is invading the church.

It is ironic and sad that today supposedly avant-garde Christian writers can strike this cool, evasive, imprecise, artistic, superficially reformist pose of Erasmus and call it "post-modern" and capture a generation of unwitting, historically naïve, emergent people who don't know they are being duped by the same old verbal tactics used by the elitist humanist writers in past generations. We saw them last year in Athanasius' day (the slippery Arians at Nicaea), and we see them now in Tyndale's day. It's not post-modern. It's pre-modern—because it is perpetual.<sup>36</sup>

The apostle Paul long ago warned, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:8).

### **A Scripture-Doubting Church**

McLaren devotes an entire chapter to "Why I Am Biblical."<sup>37</sup> To say the least, he leaves the reader unconvinced. His discussion sounds like a rehash of neo-orthodoxy.<sup>38</sup> When discussing his view of inerrancy in a recent interview, he responded with at least six paragraphs analogizing the issue to human warfare. In so doing, he raised many questions, while evasively answering none.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Smith, *Truth* 134-35. This author has an extended section (107-40) assessing the philosophizing of McLaren and company. Others have added their critique also, e.g., Charles Colson, "Emerging Confusion," *CT* (June 2006):72; Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *JETS* 42 (March 1999):3-19; Erwin W. Lutzer, *Who Are You to Judge?* (Chicago: Moody, 2002) 17-19.

<sup>36</sup>John Piper, Online [http://desiringgod.org/library/biographies/2006\\_tyndale.html](http://desiringgod.org/library/biographies/2006_tyndale.html), accessed 3/15/06.

<sup>37</sup>*AGO* 159-71.

<sup>38</sup>*AGO* 161, especially his discussion of "God-breathed" in 2 Tim 3:16.

<sup>39</sup>Street, "Interview" 9.

The words *inerrant*, *infallible*, *authoritative*, and *absolute* seem to be fighting words, not affirming words in McLaren's view and vocabulary of an orthodoxy that is generous. He seems to be ignorant of or uninterested in the magnificent work done through the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy,<sup>40</sup> composed of some of the brightest scholars of the twentieth century.

His doubts and denials show through in his other writings, also.

McLaren's proposal goes far beyond a model or method of ministry. Through his fictional dialogues he is proposing a decentralization of the Scriptures, and thus he is in conflict with the Scriptures and not simply with the views of the church today.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most erroneous and shocking statements made by McLaren concerns "the Word of God."

Also by the way, "the Word of God" is never used in the Bible to refer to the Bible. It couldn't since the Bible as a collection of 66 books hadn't been compiled yet.<sup>42</sup>

However, careful study of the phrase *λόγος θεοῦ* (*logos theou*, "the Word of God") finds over forty uses in the NT. It is equated with the OT (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31 and 6:2). It was the word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14), as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received, as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35-36). It was the message preached on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was the focus of Luke in the Book of Acts in that it spread rapidly and widely (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Paul was careful to tell the Corinthians that he spoke the Word as it was given from God, that it had not been adulterated and that it was a manifestation of truth (2 Cor 2:17; 4:2). Paul acknowledged that it was the source of his preaching (Col 1:25; 1 Thess 2:13). The Bible, in part or in whole, is "the Word of God." McLaren could not be more wrong.

McLaren is not alone in this low view of Scripture among "emergent" advocates. Any reader can see this—consider Doug Pagitt,<sup>43</sup> Chris Seay,<sup>44</sup> and Dave

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<sup>40</sup>Over a ten-year period (1977-1987), the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy held three summits for scholars (1978, 1982, 1986) and two congresses for the Christian community at large (1982, 1987) to formulate and disseminate the biblical truth about inerrancy.

<sup>41</sup>David A. Mappes, "A New Kind of Christian: A Review," *BSac* 161 (July-September 2004):303.

<sup>42</sup>*AGO* 163.

<sup>43</sup>Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 167-69.

<sup>44</sup>Chris Seay, *Faith of My Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 81-87.

Tomlinson,<sup>45</sup> as examples. One way to view “emerging” is emerging doubt, emerging uncertainty, and emerging error leading to emerging heresy and emerging unorthodoxy.

Paul certainly did not understand “the Word of God” in the manner of McLaren and his “emerging” conversationalists, nor did the Thessalonian church.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thess 2:13)

### **A Resisting-Biblical-Authority Church**

A church which is (1) eclectic, (2) ecumenical, (3) earthbound, and (4) Scripture-doubting will also be a church that resists biblical authority. It will insist on having authority over Scripture rather than being in submission to it.

McLaren pledges unswerving fidelity to the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.<sup>46</sup> But why go back only to the fourth century AD? Why not go back to Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 170) or Terullian (ca. A.D. 200)? Why not consult the *Didache* (early second century A.D.) which is the earliest, extant post-apostolic writing? Why not consult the writings of the Apostolic Fathers? Why not consult the Bible? Why limit oneself to so few, albeit essential, doctrines in relatively late church documents?

In light of McLaren’s discussions, it might be because he chafes under biblical authority. Therefore, the briefer the core connections to the Bible, the better. The reviewer will let him make the point.

But perhaps you can see the next challenge coming: *what happens when the “I” sees problems with the Bible?* How do “I” know the Bible is always right? And if “I” am sophisticated enough to realize that I know nothing of the Bible without my own involvement via interpretation, I’ll also ask how I know which school, method, or technique of biblical interpretation is right. What makes a “good” interpretation good? And if an appeal is made to a written standard (book, doctrinal statement, etc.) or to common sense or to “scholarly principles of interpretation,” the same pesky “I” who liberated us from the authority of the church will ask, “Who sets the standard? Whose common sense? Which scholars and why? Don’t all these appeals to authorities and principles outside of the Bible actually undermine the claim of ultimate biblical authority? Aren’t they just the new pope?”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 106-20. “To sum it up, we can say that the Bible is God’s word provided we recognize that the “word” is an event mediated by the Bible and not the book itself” (120).

<sup>46</sup>*AGO* 28, 32.

<sup>47</sup>*AGO* 133 [emphasis in original]. See Richard L. Mayhue, “The Authority of Scripture,” *TMSJ* 15/2 (Fall 2004):227-36, for a thoroughgoing, biblical discussion of Scriptural authority.

He also calls for a new kind of preaching as if the time-test exposition of Scripture is, in light of the so-called postmodern era, insufficient, and he cites one of his liberal heroes as an expert witness supposedly to validate the point.

What is needed, he says, is a new kind of preaching, preaching that opens “out the good news of the gospel with alternative modes of speech,” that is “dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in another conversation, free of the reason of technique, unencumbered by ontologies that grow abstract, unembarrassed about concreteness.” Because “reduced speech leads to reduced lives.” Brueggemann calls on preachers to explore another approach:

To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets that speak against a prose world. The terms of that phrase are readily misunderstood. By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson’s fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name preaching.

This non-prose world—called unreal by the rulers of this age, but real to people of faith—is the world entered by the mystic, the contemplative, the visionary, the prophet, the poet.<sup>48</sup>

It is this kind of preaching that leads to enough doubt, so that no one is right, but on the other hand no one is wrong. For example, it leads to McLaren’s statement on such a critical, contemporary issue as homosexuality.

Frankly, many of us don’t know what we should think about homosexuality. . . . Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements.<sup>49</sup>

Lest anyone (McLaren included) suggest that this reviewer misunderstood or misinterpreted him (intentionally or unintentionally), listen to these sound bytes from a review of *AGO* in *The Christian Century*, which for decades has been the flagship periodical for liberalism and has a storied history of resisting biblical authority. By the way, these observations were intended as compliments, not criticisms:

But McLaren has great sympathy for liberal Protestants.<sup>50</sup>

We can see McLaren’s generosity also in his refusal to make a judgment about non-Christians’ eternal destiny.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>*AGO* 146.

<sup>49</sup>Brian McLaren, “More Important than Being Right?,” *Leadership* (Winter 2006):128.

<sup>50</sup>Jason Byassee, “New Kind of Christian,” *The Christian Century* (November 2004):28.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

So far McLaren sounds as “generous” as any good liberal.<sup>52</sup>

He displays an ongoing love of the scriptures, explored not as an infallible fact book but as a richly multilayered narrative of God’s ongoing work on Israel and the church, with Jesus at its center.<sup>53</sup>

He offers a vision of Christianity in which no one has to lose. And that has deep appeal across the theological spectrum.<sup>54</sup>

The apostle Paul had an entirely different take on the matter.

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. . . . Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you (Titus 2:1, 15).<sup>55</sup>

### A Concluding Word

Right now Emergent is a conversation, not a movement. . . . We don’t have a program. We don’t have a model<sup>56</sup>

Does the emerging church, as presently envisioned and understood by Brian McLaren, in this his manifesto, have any solid shape to it? By his own words, it could be concluded that it is more like an amorphous blob. Where is it going? What will it be like? He does not know—by his own admission. Therefore, he generally obfuscates the truth rather than clarifies it.

It is impossible to imagine Jesus, Peter, James, or Paul saying such a thing. It is inconceivable that the heroic martyrs of the faith would have given their very lives for such uncertainty. It is unthinkable, in light of Scripture, that any well-educated, articulate, bright, clever person like McLaren would try to promote such an assault on God’s Word and Christ’s church. But he does.

Dr. Albert Mohler, writing about *AGO*, observed, “Orthodoxy must be generous, but it cannot be so generous that it ceases to be orthodox. . . . [T]his orthodoxy bears virtually no resemblance to orthodoxy as it has been known and affirmed by the church throughout the centuries.”<sup>57</sup>

Another keen observer offers up this analysis.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>See Richard Mayhue, “Why We Need Doctrine,” *Moody Magazine* (January-February 1996):16-17.

<sup>56</sup>Brian McLaren as quoted by Crouch, “Emergent Mystique.”

<sup>57</sup>Mohler, “A Generous Orthodoxy.”

- McLaren downplays “doctrinal distinctives” as more-or-less worthless. Outside of the essentials of the Apostle’s Creed, which McLaren affirms, other theological arguments (and the divisions caused by such arguments) are in McLaren’s words “nauseating.”
- He encourages all segments of broader Christianity (from Orthodox, to Catholic, to Protestant, and so on) to stop fighting and start celebrating what they have in common. He also contends that Christians should not show disdain for other world religions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.) but should dialogue with them as collaborators.
- His approach is heavily influenced by a postmodern mindset, which is postevangelical, postconservative, and postliberal. He claims that his approach lies beyond absolutism and relativism, and is not found in absolutes but in conversation and interchange. . . .
- He denounces the idea of God’s sovereignty (in terms of God being “all-powerful” and “all-controlling”) because, to use McLaren’s words, it reduces human beings to “plastic chessmen.”
- McLaren faults conservative Protestants with viewing the Bible as a modern-day answer book (like an encyclopedia) and for using it simply to fight those with whom they disagree. He also finds it sadly ironic that such groups would use non-biblical words (like *inerrancy* and *infallibility*) to refer to the authority of the Bible.
- McLaren disagrees with the typical sermonizing that passes for preaching in today’s churches. Instead, he argues for something with a lot more drama, artistry, and spontaneity than long speeches that develop expository prose.
- McLaren also downplays any type of systematic theology (referring negatively to systematic theologies as modern cathedrals). Instead, he promotes a narrative theology (specifically that of James McLendon) in which ethics, doctrine (as seen in practice), and mission are emphasized.
- McLaren’s approach to “orthodoxy” is an “emerging” approach characterized by doctrinal humility (as opposed to doctrinal certainty), a willingness to question any theological tradition (especially the Reformed “tradition”), and a worldview that sees life and theology as an unfolding story or journey.
- McLaren concludes *A Generous Orthodoxy* by embracing and promoting the doctrinal uncertainty and ambiguity that characterizes the emerging approach. He finds joy in the ultimate uncertainty of beauty.<sup>58</sup>

Brian McLaren is reductionistic, revisionistic, reactionary, relativistic, revolutionary, and rationalistic as a rebel with a human cause that has no divine support. He is a man promoting a church that is far more dependent on philosophy than Scripture; that is eclectic, ecumenical, and earthbound in its substance; a church that doubts biblical certainties and resists the authority of God as found in Scripture. He has attempted to enhance the deficiency of human reason at the expense of the sufficiency of divine revelation. His writings, especially *AGO*, reflect these infamous hallmarks.

Brian McLaren, as represented in *AGO*, is a “liberative” in that he is thoroughly liberal while trying to disguise himself in conservative garb. He is a

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<sup>58</sup>Nathan Busenitz, “Why Would John MacArthur Be So Hard-Hitting?” Online at <http://faithandpractice.blogspot.com/2006/02/why-would-john-macarthur-be-so-hard.html>, accessed 9/27/06.

“philogian” whose first passion is philosophy, not theology. He is a “litastor,” i.e., a literary critic masquerading as a pastor.

In striking contrast to McLaren’s *AGO* and “the emerging church conversation,” God the Father promised,

And I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding (Jer 3:15).

And Christ commanded,

Feed my lambs. . . . Feed my sheep (John 21:15, 17).