

## EVANGELICALISM, PARADIGMS, AND THE EMERGING CHURCH

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*With the advent of “new evangelicalism” in the 1950s began a new movement among evangelicals that bases itself on human experience, minimizes the importance of doctrine, and neglects outward church relations and perhaps makes evangelicalism difficult to distinguish from the rest of Christianity. Since the Reformation, evangelicalism has undergone a number of paradigm shifts, including classic evangelicalism, pietistic evangelicalism, fundamentalist evangelicalism, and more recently, new evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Within evangelicalism, the emerging church has arisen as an attempt to serve the postmodern culture. Postmodernism is a new cultural paradigm that holds to no absolutes or certainties and that promotes pluralism and divergence. The emerging church gears itself particularly to the younger generation. Diversity within the emerging church makes it difficult to analyze as a movement. One can only analyze its individual spokesmen. One of its voices recommends returning the church to medieval practices. Other voices depart from traditions in eschatological thinking, the role of Scripture, and soteriology. Post-evangelicalism is a sort of British cousin to the emerging church and has some of the same deviations. The emerging church has surprisingly complimentary words to say about theological liberalism.*

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How a movement begins often determines to a great extent what that movement will become in its maturity. In the early years of a new movement known as “new evangelicalism,” the staff of *Christian Life* magazine published an article based on interviews with faculty members from Wheaton College, Asbury College, Denver Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, and Baylor University. It was

entitled, "Is Evangelical Theology Changing?"<sup>1</sup> These were the days when the leaders of the new evangelicalism were trying hard to differentiate their movement from the fundamentalist movement. The article listed eight ways that evangelical theology was changing:

1. "A friendly attitude toward science."
2. "A willingness to re-examine beliefs concerning the work of the Holy Spirit."
3. "A more tolerant attitude toward varying views on eschatology."
4. "A shift away from so-called extreme dispensationalism."
5. "An increased emphasis on scholarship."
6. "A more definite recognition of social responsibility."
7. "A re-opening of the subject of biblical inspiration."
8. "A growing willingness of evangelical theologians to converse with liberal theologians."<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentalists and other conservatives were quick to respond. Alva J. McClain, for example, took up the declaration of the article that the major change from fundamentalism to new evangelicalism was "a shift from contending for the faith to insistence upon the necessity of the new birth. This is undoubtedly the worst thing about the entire editorial,"<sup>3</sup> he said.

In the first place, its implications are false. Do the editors actually suppose that among the leaders of fundamentalism, historically and today, there is no proper insistence on the need of being born again? . . . But secondly, the leaders of fundamentalism were not wrong in giving first place to matters of Christian "faith," for they understood clearly that the new birth is not something which can be produced in a vacuum; and that without certain factors such an experience is totally impossible. . . . Therefore, if the editors of *Christian Life* should prove to be correct in their estimate of present trends away from objective matters of Christian faith toward matters of subjective experience, the day may come when there will be no more new births.<sup>4</sup>

Other fundamentalists, such as Richard V. Clearwaters, agreed that the main weakness in the new evangelicalism was its foundation in human experience, "ye must be born again," rather in adherence to a body of doctrine, especially the fundamentals of the faith. Clearwaters saw this emphasis as a new pietism because

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<sup>1</sup>"Is Evangelical Theology Changing," *Christian Life* 17:11 (March 1956):16-19.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Alva J. McClain, "Is Theology Changing in the Conservative Camp," *The Brethren Missionary Herald* (February 23, 1957), reprinted in *His Grace and Truth* (June 1991):17.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

it was based in human experience, depreciated doctrinal differences, and neglected outward churchly arrangements.<sup>5</sup>

Since the publication of this article in the 1950s, “what was once confined to a small group of fundamentalists in the eastern United States is now a global phenomena.”<sup>6</sup> But during these same decades, doctrine has been minimized, and multiple paradigms dressed up in evangelical clothes have appeared, so much so that historian D. G. Hart argues that there is no longer any such thing as “evangelicalism.”

Evangelicalism needs to be relinquished as a religious identity because it does not exist. In fact, it is the wax nose of twentieth-century American Protestantism. Behind this proboscis, which has been nipped and tucked by savvy religious leaders, academics and pollsters, is a face void of any discernible features.<sup>7</sup>

### PARADIGM SHIFTS

Perhaps Hart’s analysis is somewhat exaggerated, but various evangelical historians and theologians have argued that evangelicalism, which is itself a paradigm within Christianity, has gone through several paradigm shifts in history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Richard V. Clearwaters, “The Bible: The Unchanging Evangelical Volume,” *Sword of the Lord* 20 (May 4, 1956):1-2, 5-7. See also Farley P. Butler, Jr., “Billy Graham and the End of Evangelical Unity” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1976) 125-46. Butler agrees with Clearwaters: “Those familiar with statements of faith drawn up by evangelical agencies might well complain that in all cases a rather comprehensive body of doctrine was outlined. Nevertheless, Clearwaters had addressed a very real point. Increasingly, evangelicals would define their basis of fellowship in terms of a heart experience rather than acceptance of a body of doctrine” (139).

<sup>6</sup>Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 37.

<sup>7</sup>D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 17.

<sup>8</sup>Evangelicals have utilized the concept of paradigms in various ways. Apparently paradigms can even be used in name-calling. The recurring accusation of some of the historians of the fundamentalist and evangelical movements is that these movements, along with dispensationalism, have been blindly locked into an early modern paradigm, Scottish Common Sense Rationalism. For typical discussions, see Ernest Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 132-61; James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 185-379, especially 236-60; Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 15-16, 48, 83; Mark Noll, *The Disaster of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 90-93; idem, “The Common Sense Tradition and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985):216-38; and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1980) 14-17. The charge has been that those who believe in such doctrines as inerrancy accept it not because the Bible or church history teach it, but because they are locked into a rationalistic paradigm. But those who make such assertions must be aware of the impact of cultural and philosophical paradigms on their own thinking. Cf. Larry Pettegrew, “A Kinder, Gentler Theology of

Gary Dorrien, for example, distinguished three historically dominant paradigms, plus one in the making:

The first paradigm derives from the confessional and dissenting movements of the sixteenth-century Reformation. . . . I shall call it *classical evangelicalism*, while taking care to distinguish between its Reformationist and post-Reformationist (scholastic) phases as well as between its confessional and Anabaptist forms. The second paradigm, *pietistic evangelicalism*, derives from the eighteenth-century German and English Pietist movements and, in the United States, from the Great Awakenings. The third paradigm, *fundamentalist evangelicalism*, derives from the modernist-fundamentalist conflict of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Dorrien adds “that a progressive fourth kind is conceivable,” a developing paradigm that he calls “postconservative or progressive evangelical theology.”<sup>10</sup> Robert Webber thinks that “three movements of twentieth-century evangelical thought have dominated the last seventy-five years”:

They are fundamentalism, neoevangelicalism, and diversity evangelicalism. . . . By the end of the twentieth century, the issues that originally created the rift between fundamentalism and modernism had grown increasingly dim, . . . but by the end of the century evangelicalism was by and large a movement that had gone far beyond the issues that defined it in the beginning of the century.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps evangelicalism can include many paradigms at the same time. Clark Pinnock insists, “The fact is, evangelicalism is large enough to permit several paradigms to interact peacefully.”<sup>12</sup> One general understanding of evangelical paradigms could be charted as follows:

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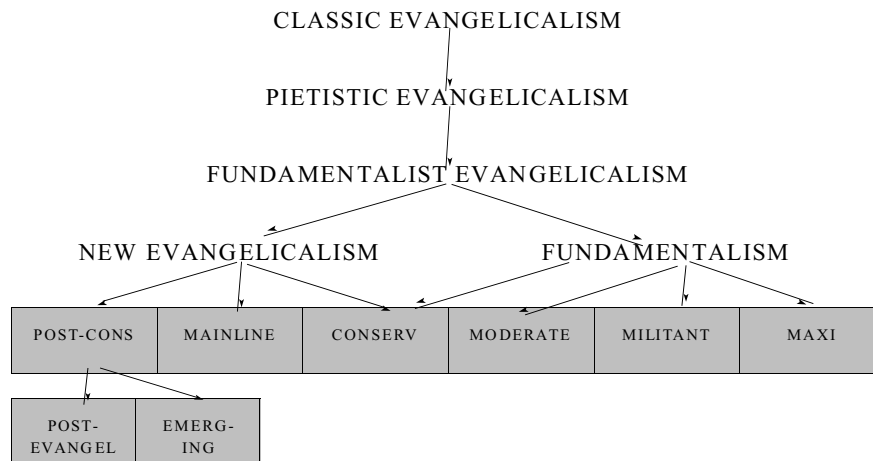
Hell,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1998):205-17.

<sup>9</sup>Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1998) 2-3.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>11</sup>Webber, *Younger Evangelicals* 24.

<sup>12</sup>Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 110.



### THE EMERGING CHURCH

Tucked away within this amorphous evangelical movement is a paradigm (also amorphous) known as the emerging church. According to its leaders, the emerging church has appeared in an attempt to minister to the postmodern culture. Gregory Boyd, for example, one of the major proponents of open theism, has insisted that this postmodern paradigm shift in culture and philosophy is challenging classical evangelicalism. Boyd writes,

The traditional Aristotelian worldview, supported by Newtonian physics and embraced by the Church's traditional theology, is fast becoming a piece of history. The immensity of this philosophic and cultural paradigm shift can hardly be overstated. It requires nothing less than another Copernican revolution in our thinking. And the challenges it is posing for traditional Christianity are no less formidable than those posed to the Church in the scientific revolution. The very meaning of the Church's confession of faith, and the philosophic integrity with which she confesses her faith, now hangs largely on the Church's ability to integrate her faith with the understanding of reality as an interrelated process.<sup>13</sup>

#### Postmodernism

According to philosophers, there have been three main cultural paradigms. The first, Premodernism, was the world of Western civilization before the eighteenth century. This culture believed in the supernatural nature of the universe that

<sup>13</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *Trinity and Process* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) Preface.

included God, Satan, demons, and other creatures such as goblins and pixies. Philosophically, reality was made up of both the unseen world of the supernatural as well as the observable natural world. The universe also had a purpose devised by some god.

Modernism then existed from about 1780 to about 1989. It began with the Enlightenment that was devoted to the use of reason to abolish religious myths. But though the supernatural was removed, or at least deconstructed, the existence of objective reality was accepted. And there was an emphasis on the ability of human reason to solve the problems of life and penetrate the mysteries of the universe. Modernism was not friendly to Christian theology. It denied miracles, the idea of revelation, the doctrine of original sin, the authority of the Bible, and the significance of Jesus Christ.

Postmodernism is the vaguely defined new cultural paradigm that asserts that there are no absolutes or certainties, and that exalts pluralism and divergence.<sup>14</sup> It expresses itself in many ways. In philosophy it assumes that perception does not necessarily reflect reality, and there may not be any reality to reflect in the first place. In metaphysics and ethics, postmodernism teaches “that there is no objective truth, that moral values are relative, and that reality is socially constructed by a host of diverse communities.”<sup>15</sup> In hermeneutics, postmodernists believe that the text of a work itself does not contain meaning, but the meaning is instead supplied by the reader. Thus for Scripture, what the author meant when he wrote the text is irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. In fact, “the very idea of meaning smacked of fascism because it implied that someone had the authority to define how a work of literature ought to be understood, and denied others the opportunity to exercise freedom of interpretation, thus stifling their creativity.”<sup>16</sup>

In systematic theology, postmodernism hates the very idea of systematization. Systems mean nothing and only exist in order to perpetuate the belief systems of those who created them. Language does not refer to anything and truth does not refer to anything, so there can be no talk about systematic theology.

### **The Emerging Church Paradigm**

To meet the new cultural paradigm, especially to minister to the younger

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<sup>14</sup>Clearly, paradigmatic thinking has coincided with the rise of postmodernism, a major foundation stone for the paradigmatic change of the emerging church. Stanley Grenz comments, “Postmodernism takes this aspect of paradigmatic beliefs seriously. It affirms that the world is not a given, an object “out there” that encounters us and that we can gain knowledge about. On the contrary, it affirms that through language we create our world and there are as many differing worlds as world-creating languages” (*A Primer on Postmodernism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996] 56).

<sup>15</sup>Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994) 193.

<sup>16</sup>Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998) 245. McGrath is referencing the works of Paul de Man.

generation that is coming up in evangelical churches, the emerging church has been formulated. Back in the 1990s some of the leaders of the Leadership Network noticed that churches were attracting fewer and fewer 18-35 year olds. So Brad Smith, president of Leadership Network, spent a couple of years learning what churches were doing to minister to Generation X. Leadership Network hosted some conferences and became involved with Zondervan Publishing House. After Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt picked the name, “emerging church,” Mark Oestreicher of Zondervan created “Emergent YS” (Youth Specialties) as a division in Zondervan that has published more than twenty books.<sup>17</sup> More recently Baker Book House has agreed to publish some of the emerging church books. The movement thus really began with concerns about church growth and retention of young people in a postmodern culture.<sup>18</sup>

It is accurate to say that the emerging church is a movement, but at the same time, it would be accurate to say that the emerging church is not a movement. It is a movement in the sense that it has the qualities of a movement. It has a name, churches and pastors that identify themselves with the emerging church, literature, and a cause—to minister to the postmodern world. In this sense, the emerging church could be called a movement. On the other hand, the emerging church is not a movement because it has so much diversity in it.<sup>19</sup> Because of the diversity, some of the emerging church participants would prefer to say that they were contributing to a conversation, rather than that they were involved in a movement.

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<sup>17</sup>Information is taken from Brian McLaren, “Emergent Past and Future,” CD of the Emerging Church Conference, San Diego, 2005.

<sup>18</sup>Interestingly, according to Thomas Kuhn, “almost always the men who achieve these fundamental inventions of a new paradigm have been either very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change” (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962] 90). Gary Dorrien also notes the impact of younger men in his analysis of evangelicalism’s new, broader paradigm, post-conservative evangelicalism. He writes, “Another, perhaps larger, and certainly younger group of evangelical theologians is seeking to blend aspects of the neoevangelical and neoorthodox approaches, sometimes with appeals to postmodern arguments that undermine traditional evangelical assumptions about the correspondence theory of truth and the character of propositional revelation” (*Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 10-11).

<sup>19</sup>Perhaps in this sense its closest historical forerunner is the Anabaptist movement. The term “Anabaptist” became a caricature in the Reformation era for any person or group that was not Reformed, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic. The older historians would sometimes list different kinds of Anabaptists, such as the Chiliastic, Mystical, Pantheistic, Unitarian, and Biblical (see, for example, Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1902; 2nd edition, 1931) 2:156. But the diversity in such groups was such that it was difficult to see how they could all be lumped together under one umbrella—especially since some of those sub-groups did not necessarily believe in rebaptizing.

### EMERGENT DIVERSITY

This diversity also makes it somewhat difficult to analyze the theology of the conversation. Ed Stetzer, for example, has suggested that there are “three broad categories of what is often called ‘the emerging church.’”<sup>20</sup> The first category is the “Relevants,” youth pastors and other church leaders who “really are just trying to make their worship, music, and outreach more contextual to emerging culture. Ironically, while some may consider them liberal, they are often deeply committed to biblical preaching, male pastoral leadership and other values common in conservative evangelical churches.”<sup>21</sup>

The second category is “Reconstructionists.” These are ministers who do not think that the current form of the church is relevant. They may hold to a fairly orthodox view of Scripture and the gospel, but have devised house churches, or other non-traditional church models. Stetzer’s comments to the Reconstructionists:

God’s Word prescribes much about what a church is. So, if emerging leaders want to think in new ways about the forms (the construct) of church, that’s fine—but any form needs to be reset as a biblical form, not just a rejection of the old form. Don’t want a building, a budget and a program? OK. Don’t want the bible, scriptural leadership, covenant community? Not OK.<sup>22</sup>

The third category within the emerging church may be called “Revisionists.” According to Stetzer,

[R]ight now, many of those who are revisionists are being read by younger leaders and perceived as evangelicals. They are not—at least according to our evangelical understanding of Scripture. . . . Revisionists are questioning (and in some cases denying) issues like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementarian nature of gender, and the nature of the Gospel itself.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, to analyze the theology of the movement is nearly impossible because what one emergent leader believes may not be what another emergent believes. But this is the point. The emergent conversation, like the broader evangelical movement as a whole, is not primarily based on theology.

Available information on the emerging church is spread throughout blogs, books, articles, web pages, and conference notes. Moreover, even if one could

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<sup>20</sup>Ed Stetzer, “First-Person: Understanding the Emerging Church,” *BP News* (January 6, 2006), online ed., <http://www.sbc baptist press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406> (accessed July 24, 2006).

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

research these comprehensively, some emerging leaders believe that theology should be in a flux. “What if theology is supposed to be a narrative, ongoing missional conversation, with different views welcome?”<sup>24</sup>

### EMERGENT THEOLOGY

In light of the fact that a univocal theological position is impossible to detect in the emerging church, the following doctrinal views must be considered to be true only of the spokesman himself.

#### **Emergent Ecclesiology: Rethinking Church**

According to Dan Kimball, the diversity within emerging churches is held together only by the common desire to rethink church. Answering the question, What is an emerging church?, Kimball says,

The frustrating answer is there’s no definition. There are so many variations of what we’re seeing emerging churches are like. Every so often in history—in American history and church history—there seems to be a rethinking of what we’re about as culture changes. What I think is going on right now is a pretty widespread rethinking of church as a whole, primarily among young leaders—many of whom have grown up and have been on staff at contemporary or traditional evangelical churches. They are rethinking, “Is this the way that we’re connecting with our culture for the gospel?” So that’s probably the common denominator—that most of them are rethinking the church.<sup>25</sup>

The reason given for rethinking church, as noted above, is that young people are dropping out of evangelical churches at an alarming rate—something like two out of three, the pollsters say. But why are they dropping out? Some say that terms like “liberal” and “conservative,” typical theological language of modernity, do not resonate with their postmodern culture. Brian McLaren says that he is a “missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.”<sup>26</sup> The terms of modernity simply do not make any sense.

Moreover, postmodern youth react against the worship styles of the previous generation of evangelicalism. Emerging churches have consequently brought back ecclesiastical ritual into their worship philosophy. One observer notes,

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<sup>24</sup>McLaren, “Emergent Past and Future.”

<sup>25</sup>“Preaching in the Emerging Church: An Interview with Dan Kimball,” *Preaching* 20/3 (November-December, 2004):7.

<sup>26</sup>Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 25. McLaren develops this identification on 105 ff.

The emerging church is not shy about raiding the storehouses of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and the Anglicans for richer liturgies as well as prayer beads, icons, spiritual direction, *lectio divina* and a deeper sacramentality. The return to ancient faith and practice is increasingly seen as a way forward in churches polarized by worship wars and theological intransigence.

Thus, emerging churches often characterize themselves as 'ancient-future,' a phrase that comes from a series of books authored by Webber (*Ancient-Future Faith, Ancient-Future Evangelism, Ancient Future Time*). This return to the past should not be confused with a nostalgia for the 1950s Protestantism or with a circling of the wagons around a purer Reformation theology. The return is deeper, looking to the treasure of the medieval and patristic theologies and to practices that have long been ignored by evangelicals.<sup>27</sup>

Undoubtedly, most evangelical and "not a few professing fundamentalist churches are also in desperate need of a strong dose of reverence and order that would see an excision of the accelerated pace, breezy attitude, pockets of pandemonium, and the urge to be contemporary and 'with it' that characterize much of their public services."<sup>28</sup> So, some of the emerging churches are turning the lights down, emphasizing the quiet spirit, and even using candles to emphasize reverence. But one must be careful which churches he chooses to emulate.

Frankly, the medieval church is not admirable. As a whole, the medieval church did not proclaim the gospel, or justification by faith, or believers' baptism, or the imminent return of Christ, or separation of church and state, or freedom of conscience, or the autonomy of the local church, or proper view of the Lord's Supper, or. . . . The list could be lengthy. Some of the best literature from this period—the writings of the mystics, for example—shows people desperate to find a relationship with God, but hardly succeeding. And the worship style of the medieval church, regardless of how beautiful or reverent it might seem, was a poor substitute for genuine Christianity.

Some of the Reformers even rejected the use of candles when they launched their Protestant churches. Elizabeth I, for example, the Protestant successor to the Roman Catholic Mary Tudor, tried to rid the church of Romish props. Attending her first worship service after her ascension, she said, "Away with these torches. We have light enough without them." Ulrich Zwingli emphasized the immediacy of God's grace that was available through Christ alone and imparted by the Holy Spirit. Religious props, therefore, were not necessary. Zwingli thought images, relics, vestments, thoughtless prayers, holy water, incense, and the burning of candles were substitutes for true piety, not aids to true piety.

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with candles, and some of the

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<sup>27</sup>Scott Bader-Saye, "The Emergent Matrix," *Christian Century* 121/24 (November 2004):21.

<sup>28</sup>Rolland D. McCune, "A Review Article: *The Younger Evangelicals*," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003):135.

Reformers may have been extreme in their views. Roman Catholic John Eck is recorded as commenting to Charles V in 1530 about Zwingli's Protestant churches, "The altars are destroyed and overthrown, the images of the saints and the paintings are burned or broken up or defaced. . . . They no longer have churches but stables."

But other Protestant church buildings, such as the simple meeting houses in which the Anabaptists or Puritans worshiped, could be brought forward for additional examples of the point. The center of Protestant "sacred spaces" has historically been the pulpit, where God's Word can be taught and preached. The medieval church is a poor model to impose on the youth of the twenty-first century.<sup>29</sup>

### **Emergent Eschatology: What Should We Expect?**

Another area of departure from biblical teaching is found in eschatology, the doctrine of last things. Brian McLaren believes that prophecy is not a sovereign road map. God has not filmed the future, and we just happen to be seeing the film now. Another way to say this would be that some of the emerging church leaders are antagonistic to dispensational premillennialism. Co-writing a book with Brian McLaren, Tony Campolo notes,

This is a theology that—with its implicit threat of being left behind, of time running out—is used by Dispensational preachers to great evangelistic effect. It has been a very effective goad to conversion. . . . To the contrary, the history of the world is infused with the presence of God, who is guiding the world toward becoming the kind of world God willed for it to be when it was created. Human history is going somewhere wonderful.<sup>30</sup>

McLaren ties what he calls the "skyhook Second Coming" into modernity and argues that pretribulationists have reinterpreted the Old Testament prophets and "marginalized Jesus with all his talk of the kingdom of God coming on earth, being among us now, and being accessible today."<sup>31</sup> But premillennialists would with strong justification respond that it is McLaren who is reinterpreting the Old Testament prophets and Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God.

### **Emergent Bibliology: What Is the Role of Scripture?**

Some of the "Revisionists" within the emerging church have accepted the teachings of higher criticism. Related to both eschatology and bibliology, McLaren

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<sup>29</sup>Rolland McCune adds, "In the middle ages ecclesiastical scholarship was deplorable. Since allegorism had generally prevailed for centuries, biblical exegesis had become sterile and the academia of the church was content largely to compile the theology of the fathers. Thus Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and others developed an authoritative patristic theology that is with them to this day" ("Review Article" 139).

<sup>30</sup>Tony Campolo, in Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (El Cajon, Calif.: Youth Specialties, 2003) 59.

<sup>31</sup>McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 237-38.

recommends Craig C. Hill's *In God's Time* for properly understanding the Old Testament prophets.<sup>32</sup> Hill takes the historical critical view, for example, that Deuteronomy, in its present form comes from the period shortly after the Exile (the deportation of the Jews to Babylon), that is about the year 500 B.C."<sup>33</sup> In his discussion of Daniel and Revelation, Hill insists,

The authors of Daniel and Revelation believed that the end of history was upon them. In any literal sense, they were mistaken, but it is our error to judge them exclusively or primarily on the basis of the historical accuracy of their predictions. . . . Instead, the test is theological. Does the apocalypse tell us something true about God.<sup>34</sup>

Or, for another example of Hill's mistrust of the prophets, he writes about Daniel as follows:

Although the story is set in Babylon at the time of the Exile, there are numerous errors in its depiction of the historical events of that period, both in the narrative and the visionary sections of the book. For example, the dating of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem in 1:1 is incorrect; it was Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, who was defeated and taken captive (2 Kings 24:8-12). Similarly, Belshazzar was neither the son of Nebuchadnezzar nor reigned as King *contra* Daniel 5:1-2. In general, the author's knowledge of Babylonian and Persian history is both thin and inexact.<sup>35</sup>

It is odd to see a pastor who claims to be an evangelical recommending without warning a writer so obviously diametrically opposed to the full inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

In addition to the recommendation of liberal sources, some emergent scholars repudiate the use of Scripture as a gateway to systematic theology. Grenz and Franke accuse theologians of concealing the texts of Scripture. They write,

Theologians exchanged the desire to give voice to the text itself for the attempt to read *through* the texts to the doctrinal system the texts concealed. Despite the well-meaning, lofty intentions of the conservative thinkers to honor the Bible as scripture, their approach in effect contributed to the silencing of the text in the church.<sup>36</sup>

McLaren adds,

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<sup>32</sup>McLaren, "Emergent Past and Future."

<sup>33</sup>Craig C. Hill, *In God's Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 43.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>36</sup>Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 63.

Similarly, when we theological conservatives seek to understand the Bible, we generally analyze it. We break it down into chapters, paragraphs, verses, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, prefixes, roots, suffixes, jots, and tittles. Now we understand it, we tell ourselves. Now we have conquered the text, captured the meaning, removed all mystery, stuffed it and preserved it for posterity, like a taxidermist, with a deer head. But what have we missed? What have we lost by reduction?<sup>37</sup>

Since the Reformation, McLaren says, the Bible has served as a philosophical authority. But we are now in a time of questioning that certitude. This questioning takes the form of four key ideas: First, the Bible must be understood as narrative, that we cannot just quote a verse without stating how it fits into the story of the Bible. Second, the questioning is rhetorical. What is the verse doing, not what the verse says. For example, the story of creation in Genesis 1 is not there to counter evolution. What is its real purpose? Third, we must approach the Bible as missional. The reason that we want to study the Bible is not just for knowledge, but to learn how to live and model the gospel. And fourth, understanding the Bible includes the ecumenical feature. We want to hear what the poor, the feminists, and others have to say about a Scripture.

Preaching the Bible must be different in postmodern times than it was in modernity. McLaren writes,

The ultimate Bible study or sermon in recent decades yielded clarity. That clarity, unfortunately, was often boring—and probably not that accurate, either, since reality is seldom clear, but usually fuzzy and mysterious; not black-and-white, but in living color. . . . How about a congregation who may not have ‘captured the meaning’ of the text, but a text that captured the imagination and curiosity of the congregation?<sup>38</sup>

### **Emergent Soteriology**

Although many participants in the emerging church conversation are orthodox in their teaching of the exclusivity of the gospel, some, such as Brian McLaren, refuse

to make a judgment about non-Christians’ eternal destiny. He thinks the incarnation suggests an affirmation by God of human culture generally—including other religions, to a degree. Jesus’ own approach to those who were different from him was to “threaten them with inclusion,” to urge them to accept their acceptance [Tillich couldn’t have said it any better]. A religion might best be judged by the “benefits it brings to nonadherents”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>McLaren, in McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures* 73.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>39</sup>Jason Byassee, “A New Kind of Christian,” *Christian Century* 121/26 (November 2004):28.

What then is the gospel? McLaren says that in modernity, the gospel has centered on the atonement. That is, what do we do about original sin so that we can go to heaven when we die? But in the emerging church, the emphasis is that the gospel is about the kingdom of God. Repent and follow Christ in society. Live the radical Christian life.

## POST-EVANGELICALISM

### What Is Post-Evangelicalism?

Closely related to the emerging church is post-evangelicalism, a term used especially by the British pastor, Dave Tomlinson, in his book simply entitled, *The Post Evangelical*.<sup>40</sup> Tomlinson is pastor of St. Luke's Anglican Church in North London, and the former leader of Holy Joe's, an unconventional church group that meets in a London pub. Tomlinson is not happy with mainline evangelicalism—not because it has become so broad and nearly unrecognizable, but just the opposite—because it is much too conservative. Still, Tomlinson insists, that though “post-evangelical does mean something different than *evangelical*, it does not mean *liberal*. I would deeply regret a post-evangelical drift toward liberalism.”<sup>41</sup>

Post-evangelicalism seems to be more or less the British cousin of the emerging church. Brian McLaren calls Tomlinson “my friend,”<sup>42</sup> and speaks of post-evangelicalism in positive terms, noting that the book, *The Post-Evangelical*, “is a very important contribution to the conversation about Christian faith and the emerging postmodern culture. . . .”<sup>43</sup> He says that post-evangelicalism doesn't mean “anti” or “non.” “It means coming from, emerging from, growing from, and emphasizes both continuity and discontinuity.”<sup>44</sup> McLaren continues,

Interestingly, non-Evangelicals are also using the prefix in a similar way (post-liberals, for example). Is it possible that post-evangelicals, post-liberals, and others who share a sense of continuity and discontinuity with the Christianity of recent memory could come together in mutually beneficial ways for the journey ahead? Could a convergence of postmodern Christians from various traditions bring new life and hope, both to Christianity and to the world? I hope so.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>42</sup>McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 120.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. The book is published under the Emergent YS branch of Zondervan.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 120-21.

### **What Is the Doctrinal Position of Post-Evangelicalism?**

One does not have to read far in Tomlinson's book to discern the doctrinal compromise being advocated. In bibliology, Tomlinson says that the doctrine of inerrancy is a "pointless diversion" because "none of the original autographs exist" and "the Bible makes no such claim for itself."<sup>46</sup> The proper way to approach Scripture is not to take it literally, but to dialogue with the Bible. Revelation is primarily personal rather than propositional. And, since the entire Bible is "human word, subject to the stains, weaknesses, and errors of any human product," students of Scripture should understand that the Bible is only the word of God "in that it is the symbolic location of divine revelation."<sup>47</sup> This is obviously Barthianism dressed up in somewhat evangelical clothes.

In soteriology, Tomlinson believes that people are saved through the cross of Christ. But it is not that Christ died in the sinner's place. The doctrine of the substitutionary atonement "makes God seem fickle, vengeful, and morally underhanded."<sup>48</sup> Christ's death on the cross demonstrated "God's love, which always forgives, rather than through a once-for-all event of forgiveness. What is changed, then, is not God's attitude toward us, but our attitude toward him."<sup>49</sup> Of course, this is not a new approach to the atonement. It is very similar to the teaching of some nineteenth-century liberals such as Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and Horace Bushnell. It was opposed with great vigor by the Princeton theologians.

As to the concept of truth, "Post-evangelicals have moved away from the certainty that characterizes evangelicalism to a more provisional symbolic understanding of truth."<sup>50</sup> They seek truth "in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgments."<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, "our tentative and imperfect doctrinal deliverances matter little to God. . . ."<sup>52</sup> Certainly our "creedal affirmations do not impress God."<sup>53</sup> One wonders what Athanasius would say to that.

Like the emerging church, post-evangelicals believe that too many American middle-class values are inherent in evangelicalism. So, for example, post-evangelicals believe that a couple living together, as long as they have committed

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<sup>46</sup>Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 110.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 113-14.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 69,

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 70.

themselves to each other, need not go through a marriage ceremony. Living together without a marriage certificate “has become an accepted social norm.” After all, “Scripture nowhere insists on a specific ceremonial model for entering into marriage.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, post-evangelicals “see no reason why men should be in charge. Family roles are negotiable.”<sup>55</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Because of the diversity within the emerging church, one must be careful not to overgeneralize. It is obvious, however, that a vocal segment of the emerging church, though claiming to be evangelical, has great affinity with theological liberalism. Non-conservatives are honored. Jason Byassee, writing in the liberal-oriented *Christian Century*, points out Brian McLaren’s liberal affinities, for example:

His most-often quoted authority on the historic faith is G. K. Chesterton; on scripture it is such postliberal interpreters as Walter Brueggemann and N. T. Wright. Theologians such as Nancy Murphy and Stanley Hauerwas have been invited to speak at Emergent conventions. Postliberals and post-conservatives may have broken off from different branches of the tree of Christendom, but they now seem to be grafting into the same trunk theologically.<sup>56</sup>

McLaren, who is one of the founders of the emergent movement, admits,

We realized very early on that we weren’t going to find the intellectual resources we needed in the evangelical world, so we were either going to have to create them or borrow them. And it turned out that a lot of us were reading the same people, who would be more respected in the mainline world, such as Walter Brueggemann, Jurgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas. What happened is we started to identify ourselves as postconservative and then we found out that there was almost a parallel movement going on in the postliberal world. And the affinities that we had were very, very strong.<sup>57</sup>

In his *Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren mentions two theologians who have helped him most: Walter Brueggemann and Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>58</sup> Walter Brueggemann, is a postliberal, updated neo-orthodox Old Testament scholar. He is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary of New York, believes that a historical-

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>56</sup>Byassee, “New Kind of Christian” 30.

<sup>57</sup>Brian McLaren, in Scott Bader-Saye, “Emergent Matrix” 21.

<sup>58</sup>See *Generous Orthodoxy* 64, 110.

grammatical understanding of the Old Testament to be oppressive and reductionist. Brueggemann writes, "Interpretation is never objective but is always mediated through the voice, perceptions, hopes, fears, interest, and hurts of the interpreter."<sup>59</sup>

Lesslie Newbigin (1909-98) was bishop of the Church of South India, associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches, and a postmodern missiologist.<sup>60</sup> Though arguing for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and asserting that it is vital to make the confession that "it is the man Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world," he also asserts that this "does not mean, as critics seem to assume, that we believe that God's saving mercy is limited to Christians and that the rest of the world is lost."<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this is where McLaren gets his idea, "I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus."<sup>62</sup>

In the 1956 article, "Is Evangelical Theology Changing," point eight was "A growing willingness of evangelical theologians to converse with liberal theologians."<sup>63</sup> Modern-day postconservative evangelicals, including some of the leaders of the emerging church, are also "eager to engage in dialogue with nonevangelical theologians, and they seek opportunities to converse with those whom conservative evangelicals would probably consider enemies."<sup>64</sup> As one critic of postconservative evangelicalism, Thomas Oden, observes, "They emphasize dialogue, rather than polemics, as the proper approach to nonevangelical theologians and philosophers."<sup>65</sup> Oden's further observation ought to be well taken by all true Christians: "Although I concede that there are other tasks more important than the exposure of heresy, I warn: If there is no immune system to resist heresy, there will soon be nothing but the teeming infestation of heresy."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life* (Minneapolis.: Fortress, 2005) 38. Brueggemann continues, "We are now coming to see that Euro-American theology done in classic historical-critical ways, done in the academy, done by white, established males is also contextualized and speaks from and for a certain context and interest. This is true for those who speak through scientific methods and for those who speak primarily out of a dogmatic tradition. This does not mean that these interpretations are wrong or easily to be dismissed. It means that they must be taken for what they are, as statements of advocacy. They have no interpretive privilege, but must be held along with other readings in a church that seeks to be faithful and obedient" (38).

<sup>60</sup>See, for example, Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 129.

<sup>61</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 170.

<sup>62</sup>McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 64.

<sup>63</sup>"Is Evangelical Theology Changing?" 19.

<sup>64</sup>Roger Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *Christian Century* (May 3, 1995) 480.

<sup>65</sup>Thomas C. Oden, "The Real Reformers are Traditionalists," *Christianity Today* (February 9, 1998):45.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.