

## **PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE: THE EMERGENT APPROACH**

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*The most recent battle being waged in the evangelical church is one related to the perspicuity of Scripture. Within the larger context of the Emerging Church Movement is the Emergent Church, whose leading spokesman is Brian D. McLaren. Because of his prominence as a leader of both the Emergent Church and the Emerging Church Movement, what he says about the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture needs to be scrutinized. McLaren undermines the clarity of Scripture by questioning whether biblical doctrine can be held with certainty. He questions the clarity of Scripture by needlessly introducing complexity into biblical interpretation. He further dismisses scriptural clarity by questioning the possibility of deriving propositional truth from the Bible. Also, his refusal to abide by the Bible's emphasis on the exclusive nature of the Christian gospel raises questions about the Bible's clarity. McLaren's pointed criticism of conservative evangelicals who insist on the clarity of Scripture is another indication of his disdain for the perspicuity of Scripture. McLaren's position on the perspicuity of Scripture is clearly at odds with what the Bible itself says about its own clarity.*

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From the very beginning, the battle between good and evil has been a battle for the truth. The serpent, in the Garden of Eden, began his temptation by questioning the truthfulness of God's previous instruction: "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'? ... You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:1, 4-5). And this has been his tactic ever since—casting doubt on the straightforward revelation of God.

Throughout the centuries, that ages-old war on truth has been repeatedly fought, even within the church. The biblical writer Jude, for instance, faced such a situation when he wrote his epistle. Though he had wanted to write about the wonders of the common salvation that he shared with his readers, he was compelled instead to urge his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3). False teachers, like spiritual terrorists, had secretly crept into the church (v. 4). The lies they were spreading, like doctrinal hand grenades, were spiritually devastating. They were enemies of the truth, and Jude was compelled to confront and expose them.

Over the past few decades, the church in the United States has fought the

same battle on several fronts. In the sixties and seventies, the doctrine of biblical *inerrancy* came under direct attack. The Bible, it was said, was full of errors, and thus could not be trusted as historically or scientifically accurate. In the eighties and nineties, the *sufficiency* of Scripture was targeted. The charismatic movement (with its need for additional revelation from God) and Christian psychology (with its emphasis on neo-Freudian counseling techniques) attempted to undermine the fact that God “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him” as revealed in Scripture (2 Pet 1:3).

As the millennium drew to a close, the attack on God’s revealed truth came in a new way. This time the *relevance* of Scripture was the point of attack. Rather than being directly maligned, church leaders for whom biblical teaching was simply not a major priority quietly discarded the Bible. “The Seeker Movement” to some degree advocated limiting the presentation of divine truth to what unbelievers are willing to tolerate.

A new movement is now arising in evangelical circles. Apparently, the main object of attack will be the *perspicuity* of Scripture. Influenced by postmodern notions about language, meaning, subjectivity, and truth, many younger evangelicals are questioning whether the Word of God is clear enough to justify certainty or dogmatism on points of doctrine. Ironically, this new movement to a certain extent ignores all the previous debates. Instead, its proponents are more interested in dialogue and conversation. As a result, they scorn and rebuff propositional truth (which tends to end dialogue rather than cultivate it) as an outmoded vestige of twentieth-century modernism.

The movement is very diverse and still developing, but it is generally called “*the Emerging Church*.”

### **Emerging, Emergent, and Brian D. McLaren**

The Emerging Church Movement (hereafter, ECM) is made up of an admittedly broad and variegated collection of pastors and church leaders, with a common concern for Christian mission to a postmodern generation.

At the heart of the “movement”—or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the “conversation”—lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is “emerging.” Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation, the emerging generation.<sup>1</sup>

Mark Driscoll, an ECM pastor, defines the movement this way:

The emerging church is a growing, loosely connected movement of primarily young pastors who are glad to see the end of modernity and are seeking to function as missionaries who bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to emerging and postmodern cultures. The emerging church welcomes the tension of holding in one closed hand the unchanging truth of evangelical Christian theology (Jude 3) and holding in one open hand the many

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<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 12.

cultural ways of showing and speaking Christian truth as a missionary to America (1 Cor. 9:19–23). Since the movement, if it can be called that, is young and is still defining its theological center, I do not want to portray the movement as ideologically unified because I myself swim in the theologically conservative stream of the emerging church.<sup>2</sup>

In calling himself a theological conservative, however, Driscoll seems to be in the minority among ECM leaders. The neo-liberal thrust embraced by the majority of those in ECM is spearheaded by Emergent, an organization begun in 2001 whose deliberate desire is to impact the entire movement.

By 2001, we had formed an organization around our friendship, known as Emergent, as a means of inviting more people into the conversation. Along with us, the “emerging church” movement has been growing, and we in Emergent Village endeavor to fund the theological imaginations and spiritual lives of all who consider themselves a part of this broader movement.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the influence of Emergent, many see the term as synonymous with “emerging,” referring to the movement as a whole as the Emergent Church Movement. Those who are more conservative, however, differentiate between the terms. As Driscoll writes,

I was part of what is now known as the Emerging Church Movement in its early days and spent a few years traveling the country to speak to emerging leaders in an effort to help build a missional movement in the United States. The wonderful upside of the emerging church is that it elevates mission in American culture to a high priority, which is a need so urgent that its importance can hardly be overstated.

I had to distance myself, however, from one of many streams in the emerging church because of theological differences. Since the late 1990s, this stream has become known as Emergent. The emergent church is part of the Emerging Church Movement but does not embrace the dominant ideology of the movement. Rather the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity.<sup>4</sup>

It is this particular segment of ECM, the Emergent Church, that has most blatantly attacked the clarity and authority of the Scripture. And of all the voices that make up Emergent, the most prominent belongs to Brian D. McLaren. For this reason, this article will focus primarily on him and his teachings.

McLaren has been called the emerging church’s “most influential thinker,”<sup>5</sup> as well as “the de facto spiritual leader for the emerging church.”<sup>6</sup> He currently serves as the chair of the board of directors for Emergent Village, and is a frequent

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 22.

<sup>3</sup>“About Emergent Village.” Online at: <http://www.emergentvillage.org/about/>, accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>Driscoll, *Confessions* 21.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Mohler, “What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part One” *Al Mohler’s Weblog* (June 29, 2005), online at: [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2005-06-29](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-06-29), accessed Sep. 26, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* (November 2004):38.

guest on television programs and radio shows. In February 2005, he was listed as “One of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America” by *Time Magazine*.<sup>7</sup> His books include *A New Kind of Christian*, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and most-recently *The Secret Message of Jesus*. Because of his prominent role within both Emergent, and the larger ECM, it is appropriate to critique his views—recognizing that in many ways they represent the philosophical underpinnings of the whole.

### **Brian McLaren and the Clarity of Scripture**

The doctrine of the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture (i.e., that the central message of the Bible is clear and understandable, and that the Bible itself can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense) has been a cornerstone of evangelical belief ever since the Reformation. The dominant Roman Catholic idea had been that the Bible was obscure and difficult to understand. But the Reformers disagreed, arguing instead that anyone who could read could understand biblical teaching. Rather than limiting biblical interpretation to the clergy or the Magisterium, the Reformers encouraged lay Christians to study and interpret God’s Word on their own. This was premised on the Reformed belief that the Bible itself was inherently clear and that God had the ability to communicate His message to men in an understandable fashion. As Luther explained to Erasmus:

But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from [our] own blindness or want [i.e., lack] of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of truth.... Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear scriptures of God.... If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures but he that hath the Spirit of God.... If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous; but all things that are in the Scriptures, are by the Word brought forth into the clearest light, and proclaimed to the whole world.<sup>8</sup>

Though such an understanding, as Luther openly admits, did not demand complete agreement among Protestants on every secondary doctrine, it did establish an important principle: That the Word of God was revealed in an understandable way, that its central message is clear, and that (because it is clear) all men are fully accountable to its message.

In contrast to this, the teachings of Brian McLaren (and others of his Emergent persuasion) directly assault the doctrine of biblical clarity. Instead of promoting a settled confidence in the fact that the Bible can be understood, McLaren does just the opposite. And he does so in at least five important ways.

#### *1. McLaren and Doctrinal Uncertainty*

McLaren undermines the clarity of Scripture by denying that biblical doctrine can be held with any degree of certainty. Certainty, of course, comes from clarity. Where there is no clarity, there is no certainty. And vice versa.

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<sup>7</sup>Online at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/photoessay>, accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 25-29.

For the Reformers, it was because the Bible was clear that they were certain about its central message. But not so for McLaren, who says: “Certainty is overrated.... History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren’t.”<sup>9</sup> And in another place,

When we talk about the word ‘faith’ and the word ‘certainty,’ we’ve got a whole lot of problems there. What do we mean by ‘certainty’? . . . Certainty can be dangerous. What we need is a proper confidence that’s always *seeking* the truth and that’s *seeking* to live in the way God wants us to live, but that also has the proper degree of self-critical and self-questioning passion.<sup>10</sup>

In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren even champions ambiguity. He writes,

A warning: as in most of my other books, there are places here where I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity.<sup>11</sup>

So it is no surprise when he readily admits that he is not even sure if what he is espousing is correct.

If I seem to show too little respect for your opinions or thought, be assured I have equal doubts about my own, and I don’t mind if you think I’m wrong. I’m sure I am wrong about many things, although I’m not sure exactly which things I’m wrong about. I’m even sure I’m wrong about what I think I’m right about in at least some cases. So wherever you think I’m wrong, you could be right. If, in the process of determining that I’m wrong, you are stimulated to think more deeply and broadly, I hope that I will have somehow served you anyway.<sup>12</sup>

For McLaren, benefit comes not from being right, but from dialoguing with those of all different viewpoints. Thus, great reward results in always pursuing but never finally arriving at truth. Correctness in doctrine is something that cannot be attained—at least not with any degree of certainty. In McLaren’s words, “The achievement of ‘right thinking’ therefore recedes, happily, farther beyond our grasp the more we pursue it. As it eludes us, we are strangely rewarded: we feel gratitude and love, humility and wonder, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming.”<sup>13</sup> In his view, Christians “must be open to the perpetual possibility that our received understandings of the gospel may be faulty, imbalanced, poorly nuanced, or downright warped and twisted . . . [and must] continually expect to rediscover the gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Greg Warner, “Brian McLaren,” *FaithWorks* magazine, Online at: [http://www.faithworks.com/archives/brian\\_mclaren.htm](http://www.faithworks.com/archives/brian_mclaren.htm), accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>10</sup>“Religion and Ethics,” *Newsweekly* Episode no. 846 (PBS television, July 15, 2005), Online at: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/interview.html>, accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 22-23.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

McLaren rightly anticipates that theological conservatives will find such an approach to biblical doctrine unacceptable.

If, for you, *orthodox* means finally “getting it right” or “getting it straight,” mine is a pretty disappointing, curvy orthodoxy. But if, for you, orthodoxy isn’t a list of correct doctrines, but rather the *doxa* in orthodoxy means “thinking” or “opinion,” then the lifelong pursuit of expanding thinking and deepening, broadening opinions about God sounds like a delight, a joy.<sup>15</sup>

By reducing biblical doctrines to “opinions,” McLaren denies both Scripture’s clarity and its authority. Because the Bible is unclear, the chorus of divergent interpretations are all granted equal validity. This means that the authority of any one viewpoint (as that which is correct) vanishes, since all sides are equally reduced to nothing more than personal opinions.

## 2. McLaren and Interpretive Complexity

McLaren sees such incredible degrees of complexity, with even the most straightforward biblical teachings, that he hopelessly obscures what the Bible makes simple. One of many examples would be his vacillation with regard to homosexuality. Though the issue is clear cut in Scripture (Genesis 19; Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; cf. Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:3-5; 1 Tim 1:9-10; Jude 7), McLaren remains unsure. He expresses his opinion this way:

Frankly, many of us don’t know what we should think about homosexuality. We’ve heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.” That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren’t sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, McLaren sees so much complexity—in both the biblical prohibition and the contemporary practice regarding homosexual behavior—that he is unable to respond definitively to the question of homosexuality. Though such a blatant disregard for the straightforward teaching of Scripture hardly needs a response, Doug Wilson’s rebuttal seems particularly apropos.

If someone were to ask me whether the Bible teaches that Jesus went to Capernaum, I would say yes, it does. I would not be in agony over the question. It is not the most important question, but it is *clear*. If someone were to ask if the apostle Paul taught that homosexual behavior (both male and female forms) is the dead end result of idolatry, I

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 293-94.

<sup>16</sup>Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response” (Jan 23, 2006), *Leadership Journal Blog*, Online at: [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html), accessed August 8, 2006.

would say yes again. No agony in the exegesis whatever. There is only agony if you are lusting after respect from the world, which they will not give to you unless you are busy making plenty of room for their lusts. And that is what the emergent movement is doing—this is really all about sex. And, conveniently enough, this has the added benefit of making room for evangelical lusts. Son of a gun. All that agony paid off.<sup>17</sup>

For McLaren, other areas of ambiguity (or even outright disregard for the straightforward reading of Scripture) include doctrines like eternal punishment,<sup>18</sup> eternal life,<sup>19</sup> biblical inerrancy,<sup>20</sup> divine sovereignty,<sup>21</sup> divine masculinity,<sup>22</sup> any doctrinal “distinctive,”<sup>23</sup> and any teaching that would exclude other denominations or even other religions from being enthusiastically embraced.<sup>24</sup> As he himself says, “The last thing I want is to get into nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right....”<sup>25</sup> Even *truth* itself is presented as a concept too complicated for most people to understand.

[One] other issue is absolute truth.... The levels of complexity are so deep that a lot of people have no idea what they’re talking about.... Sometime the words *absolute truth* mean for people that they never have to give a second thought. I believe that to be a human being, although we can know truth, we are never in a position where we shouldn’t stand open to the possibility of correction. When people use the word *truth*, they can mean a lot of different things.... But when you use a word like this, you’re entering into a philosophical discussion that has been around since the time of the Greeks and is a very profound, difficult, sophisticated discussion.<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, in his most recent book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren asserts that there are certain areas of doctrine on which he will speak clearly. He explains,

In one of my previous books, I said that clarity is sometimes overrated and that intrigue is correspondingly undervalued. But here I want to say—clearly—that it is tragic for anyone, especially anyone affiliated with the religion named after Jesus, not to be clear

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<sup>17</sup>Doug Wilson, “All About Sex,” *Blog and Mablog* (Jan. 25, 2006), Online at: <http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=1895>, accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>18</sup>McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* 100.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 159-60.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 113-14.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>26</sup>Brian McLaren, *Relevant Magazine Interview*, Online at: [http://www.relevantmagazine.com/beta/issue\\_21\\_missingpointB.php](http://www.relevantmagazine.com/beta/issue_21_missingpointB.php), accessed August 8, 2006. For more on McLaren’s sevenfold definition of truth, see “An Open Letter to Chuck Colson,” December 2003, <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000018.html>, accessed August 8, 2006.

about what Jesus' message actually was.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the rest of *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren presents Jesus' Kingdom message in a way that most closely aligns with the non-eschatological, social activism of twentieth-century liberalism. But such an understanding hardly accounts for many of the clear NT statements as to the true essence of the gospel message (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3-4; 2 Cor 5:17-21).

Moreover, by asserting that this "secret message" has just recently been discovered, McLaren is forced to deal with the question, Why hasn't this reading arisen sooner?<sup>28</sup> A refutation of McLaren's reasons (which are ultimately unconvincing) are outside the scope of this article, but the following point remains: By overturning the historic understanding of Scripture with a new, secret message of Jesus, McLaren has again undermined the clarity of Scripture. Only a Bible that is impossibly ambiguous can fit in McLaren's neo-gnostic model.

### 3. McLaren and Propositional Truth

McLaren dismisses propositional truth statements as a valid way for understanding the Bible. By denying the correspondence theory of truth, and instead embracing the approach of Leslie Newbigin<sup>29</sup>—that there really is no difference between facts and assumptions—McLaren and his colleagues are essentially driven to a place where no objective truth is possible (or at least possible to know definitively) and where any opinion is as good as any other.

McLaren is not the first evangelical to attempt this. In his 1993 book, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, Stanley J. Grenz sets out a similar premise, in which "we as evangelicals [should] not view theology merely as the restatement of a body of propositional truths"<sup>30</sup> as we engage "in the quest for truth."<sup>31</sup> Because any one understanding of doctrine may be incorrect, as a model of understanding reality, even when "informed by Scripture and by the mileposts of theological history—we must maintain a stance of openness to other models, being aware of the tentativeness and incompleteness of all such systems."<sup>32</sup> According to Grenz, propositional truth statements are the outmoded garments of modernism, which—like last year's clothing styles—desperately need to be discarded.

The problem with evangelical propositionalism is its often under-developed understanding of how the cognitive dimension functions within the larger whole of revelation. Therefore evangelical theologians tend to misunderstand the social nature of

<sup>27</sup>Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006) 7.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 211.

<sup>29</sup>Newbigin put forth these ideas most clearly in *The Gospel in Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>30</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1993) 79. Grenz's other books such as *A Primer on Postmodernism*, *Theology for the Community of God*, and *Beyond Foundationalism* establish the same premises.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. It should also be noted that McLaren has been very upfront about the significant impact that Stanley Grenz had on him through both his writings and his personal friendship.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 84.

theological discourse. More than its advocates have cared to admit, evangelical theology has been the captive of the orientation to the individual knower that has reigned over the Western mindset throughout the modern era. But this orientation is now beginning to lose its grip. Therefore, if our theology is to speak the biblical message in our contemporary situation, we must shed the cloak of modernity and reclaim the more profound community outlook in which the biblical people of God were rooted.<sup>33</sup>

Such statements may satisfy postmodern philosophers, but they do little to promote any confidence in the clarity of Scripture. In fact, they do exactly the opposite—making room for a type of biblical interpretation in which anyone’s view is as good as anyone else’s. Practically speaking, such subjectivism poses a very serious threat. As Al Mohler rightly observes,

The Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity. Unwilling to affirm that the Bible contains propositional truths that form the framework for Christian belief, this movement argues that we can have Christian symbolism and substance without those thorny questions of truthfulness that have so vexed the modern mind. The worldview of postmodernism—complete with an epistemology that denies the possibility of or need for propositional truth—affords the movement an opportunity to hop, skip and jump throughout the Bible and the history of Christian thought in order to take whatever pieces they want from one theology and attach them, like doctrinal post-it notes, to whatever picture they would want to draw.<sup>34</sup>

McLaren and his emergent associates deny allegations of relativism.<sup>35</sup> But, “although McLaren renounces relativism . . . , it is not clear when and how he would fight for the truth over against error.”<sup>36</sup> Practically speaking, then, his system embraces such doctrinal and hermeneutical subjectivism that, essentially, any view is accepted—as long as it shows tolerance to other views within the confines of dialogue. In order to keep the conversation going, this subjectivism begins with a denial that Scripture is clear and that what it says is authoritative for faith and practice.

That is in keeping with its postmodern premise. The one essential, non-negotiable demand that postmodernism makes of everyone is this: No one is supposed to think he or she knows any objective truth. Because postmodernists often suggest that every opinion should be shown equal respect, it seems (on the surface) to be driven by a broad-minded concern for harmony and tolerance, which sounds very charitable and altruistic. But what really underlies the postmodernist belief system is an utter *intolerance* for every worldview that makes any universal truth-claims—particularly biblical Christianity.

#### 4. McLaren and Religious Ecumenism

The exclusivity of the Christian gospel is an unmistakable theme that runs

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>34</sup>Albert Mohler, “A Generous Orthodoxy—Is It Orthodox?” *Al Mohler’s Weblog* (June 20, 2005), online at: <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?adate=6/20/2005>, accessed August 8, 2006.

<sup>35</sup>See *A Generous Orthodoxy* 285-86.

<sup>36</sup>John M. Frame, “Review of Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*,” *Act 3 Review* 14/3 (2005):97-105.

throughout Scripture. In the OT, the Lord plainly told the Hebrew people:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exod 20:3–6; cf. 20:23; 23:24; 34:14; Lev 19:4; Josh 23:7; 2 Kgs 17:35).<sup>37</sup>

In the NT, the message is equally clear. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). The apostle Peter proclaimed to a hostile audience, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The apostle John wrote, “[B]ut he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). Again and again, Scripture stresses that Jesus Christ is the only hope of salvation for the world. “For there is one God [and] one mediator also between God and men, [the] Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Only Christ can atone for sin, and therefore only Christ can provide salvation. “And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11-12).

Of course, those truths are antithetical to the central tenet of postmodernism. They make exclusive, universal truth-claims, authoritatively declaring Christ as the only true way to heaven, and all other belief-systems as erroneous. That is what Scripture teaches. It is also what the true church has proclaimed throughout her history. It is the message of Christianity. And it simply cannot be adjusted to accommodate postmodern sensitivities and immoralities.

McLaren, however, flatly rejects the straightforward exclusivism of Scripture. In his version of orthodoxy, Christians should “see members of other religions and non-religions not as enemies but as beloved neighbors, whenever possible, as dialogue partners and even collaborators.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, “having acknowledged and accepted the coexistence of other faiths, Christians should actually talk with people of other faiths, engaging in gentle and respectful dialogue.... We must assume that God is an unseen partner in our dialogues who has something to teach all participants, including us.”<sup>39</sup> Later he says,

To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus (while learning it better myself), I would gladly become one of them (whoever they are) to whatever degree I can, to embrace them, to join them, to enter into their world without judgment but with saving love, as mine has been entered by the Lord. I do this *because of my deep identity as a fervent Christian*, not in spite of it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>38</sup>McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* 35.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 257-58.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 264. McLaren continues this broadly ecumenical theme in *The Secret Message of Jesus* 4-8.

In light of his apparent openness to non-Christian faiths,<sup>41</sup> that he finds all broadly Christian religions also to be equally valid is not surprising. After discussing the “Jesus” of the conservative Protestant, the Pentecostal, the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, the liberal Protestant, the Anabaptist, and the Liberation Theologian, he asks,

Why not celebrate them all? ... Up until recent decades, each tribe felt it had to uphold one image of Jesus and undermine some or all of the others. What if, instead, we saw these various emphases as partial projections that together can create a hologram; a richer, multidimensional vision of Jesus?

What if we enjoy them all, the way we enjoy foods from differing cultures? Aren't we glad we can enjoy Thai food this week, Chinese next, Italian the following week, Mexican next month, and Khmer after that? What do we gain by saying that Chinese food is permissible, but Mexican food is poison? Isn't there nourishment and joy (and pleasure) to be had from each tradition?<sup>42</sup>

Without question, the Bible's claim that salvation is in Christ alone by faith alone is certainly out of harmony with the Emergent notion of “tolerance.” But it is, after all, just what the Bible plainly teaches. In the words of one writer,

But again, McLaren is insensitive to spiritual warfare. The Bible is sharply negative toward false worship, the worship of idols, rather than the true God. Paul's missionary labors were not only positive, but also negative: to turn the Gentiles away from their idols to serve Christ (as in Acts 17:29-31, 1 Thess. 1:9).... Insofar as McLaren confuses the issue of false worship, he confuses something of vital importance to the God of Scripture.<sup>43</sup>

Only by turning a blind eye to the Bible's clear teaching, can anyone entertain with any enthusiasm the broad ecumenism of McLaren.

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<sup>41</sup>McLaren attempts to explain away allegations that his views represent “a complete reconsideration of Christian missions” (Albert Mohler, “Generous Orthodoxy” <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?adate=2/16/2005>, accessed August 8, 2006) by saying, “I am not saying that followers of Jesus should remain loyal to all the doctrines or practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, or whatever. I'm saying they should ‘remain within their ... contexts.’ Because of recent U.S. foreign policy and the sometimes careless religious rhetoric of some of our political and religious leaders, along with our country's export of a lot of filth (pornography, etc.)—today in many countries to be identified with ‘the Christian religion’ is to be identified with U.S. military aggression, religious bigotry, and moral degeneration. I can't blame people for wanting to avoid association with those things, since I myself do not want to be associated with them.... This awareness—that people can be identified as Christ-followers without having to endorse everything associated with the word ‘Christian’—is widespread in the missions community, and has been an accepted methodology among missiologists for a long time” (Brian McLaren, “Would You Please Clarify This Paragraph in *A Generous Orthodoxy*,” online at: [http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/2005/05/would\\_you\\_please\\_clarify\\_this\\_paragraph\\_in\\_generous\\_orthodoxy\\_237.html](http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/2005/05/would_you_please_clarify_this_paragraph_in_generous_orthodoxy_237.html), accessed August 8, 2006). But such explanations fail to account convincingly for all that McLaren asserts in *A Generous Orthodoxy* and his other writings, beginning with his deemphasis on correct doctrine and his redefinition of the gospel message.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>43</sup>Frame, “Review of *A Generous Orthodoxy*” 104-5.

## 5. McLaren and Conservative Evangelicals

McLaren strongly criticizes those who believe in clear interpretation of the Bible. The criticism most sharply addresses Reformed conservatives—namely, those who are most committed to the clear teachings of Scripture and the propositional truths found in the Bible. For example, McLaren compares the five points of Calvinism to “cigarettes, the use of which often leads to a hard-to-break Protestant habit that is hazardous to spiritual health (and that makes the breath smell bad),”<sup>44</sup> and describes systematic theologies as “conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument” which demonstrate the “arrogant intellectualizing” of modern evangelicals.<sup>45</sup> He denounces those who hold, with any conviction, to “a foundationalist epistemology,”<sup>46</sup> biblical inerrancy,<sup>47</sup> or the *solas* of the Reformation.<sup>48</sup> Says McLaren, “The belief that truth is best understood by reducing it to a few fundamentals or a single ‘sola’ insight is, to me, at least questionable if not downright dangerous.”<sup>49</sup> He negatively describes those who believe that the Bible presents clear propositional truth statements, which can be believed and defended with certainty, as those who “claim (overtly, covertly, or unconsciously) to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever”<sup>50</sup> and who “claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall.”<sup>51</sup> Near the beginning of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren admits,

[Y]ou should know that I am horribly unfair in this book, lacking all scholarly objectivity and evenhandedness. My own upbringing was way out on the end of one of the most conservative twigs of one of the most conservative branches of one of the most conservative limbs of Christianity, and I am far harder on conservative Protestant Christians who share that heritage than I am on anyone else. I’m sorry. I am consistently oversympathetic to Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, even dreaded liberals, while I keep elbowing my conservative brethren in the ribs in a most annoying—some would say *ungenerous*—way. I cannot even pretend to be objective or fair.<sup>52</sup>

But the reason for the rub is much deeper than merely McLaren’s reaction to his upbringing. The problem is that the propositionalism of conservative, biblical Christianity is antithetical to, and incompatible with, McLaren’s post-conservative, ambiguous *non-orthodox*. The two are mutually exclusive.

Interestingly, McLaren also redefines humility as a willingness to accept doctrinal uncertainty, and then promotes it as the foremost virtue of his emergent worldview.

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<sup>44</sup>McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 195.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 151-52.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 159-60, 164.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 198.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 35.

[W]hat we need is not new sectarian terminology or new jargon or a new elitist clique, but rather a humble rediscovery of the simple, mysterious way of Jesus that can be embraced across the whole Christian horizon (and beyond). What we need is something lived, not just talked or written about. The last thing we need is a new group of proud, super protestant, hyper puritan, ultra restorationist reformers who say, “Only we’ve got it right!” and thereby damn everybody else to the bin of five minutes ago and the bucket of below-average mediocrity.... A generous orthodoxy, in contrast to the tense narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, doesn’t take itself too seriously. It is humble; it doesn’t claim too much; it admits it walks with a limp.<sup>53</sup>

Tolerance, then, is the new humility. Blind to the outrageous pride of condescendingly elevating oneself above the church’s greatest theologians and exegetes, McLaren insists that his position is humble. But those who are unwilling to tolerate other ideas, even when those ideas contradict the plain reading of Scripture, he denounces as arrogant, disrespectful, and insensitive.<sup>54</sup> In this way, McLaren attempts to discredit those who boldly proclaim the clear message of Scripture. Instead of humbly acknowledging and submitting to the clarity of God’s revealed Word—which is true humility (Isa 66:1-2), McLaren redefines humility in order to undercut his detractors without having to address their arguments. Perhaps this is why more conservative pastors, even within the broader ECM, find McLaren’s approach so dangerous. In the words of Mark Driscoll,

Postmodernity is tough to pin down, though, because it changes the rules of hermeneutics but keeps the Bible. Some post-modern pastors keep the Bible but reduce it to a story lacking any authority over us, feeling free to play with the interpretation and meaning of particular texts. They do not believe in a singular truthful interpretation. They believe that the interpreter ultimately has authority over the text and can therefore use it as he or she pleases rather than submit to it.

While this dance may seem novel, it is as old as Eden. Satan first used this tactic on Adam and Eve, and later used it to tempt Jesus, by manipulating God’s Word to change its meaning. In previous generations, the fight was over the inerrancy of Scripture. Today, the fight is over the authority and meaning of Scripture.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Concluding Remarks Regarding Brian McLaren*

No doubt, some will find the above analysis unfair or unloving. But with Brian McLaren and his collaborators at Emergent, much more is at stake than mere semantics or slight philosophical disagreement. The purity of the gospel itself is at stake. If God’s Word cannot be understood with certainty, a saving comprehension of the gospel becomes impossible. But if the straightforward reading of Scripture is allowed to stand, then McLaren’s system of doctrinal subjectivity crashes to the ground. As D. A. Carson observes: “I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and [Steve] Chalke [another ECM author] have largely abandoned the gospel.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 258-59.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 168.

<sup>56</sup>D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant* 186.

For those who share “the love of the truth” (2 Thess 2:10), and who are committed to “guard what has been entrusted” to them (1 Tim 6:20), no room remains for the philosophical agenda of Emergent. The apostle Paul reserved the harshest words for those who would undermine the gospel:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:6–9)

And the Lord Himself warned His followers, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). After all, those who distort the Scriptures do so to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16).

### **A Brief Defense and Explanation of Perspicuity**

The doctrine of biblical clarity, the perspicuity of Scripture, pervades the pages of God’s Word. Scripture describes itself as that which gives light (Ps 119:105; 2 Pet 1:19a), is profitable (2 Tim 3:16-17), explains salvation (2 Tim 3:15b), addresses common people (cf. Deut 6:4; Mark 12:37; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:1), can be understood by children (Deut 6:6-7; Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 3:14-15), and should be used to test the validity of religious ideas (Acts 17:11; cf. 2 Cor 10:5; 1 Thess 5:21-22). It is the truth (John 17:17) which sets men free (John 8:31-32).

Moreover, the Bible claims to be the very Word of God. Over 2,000 times in the OT alone, the assertion is made that God spoke what is written within its pages. From the beginning (Gen 1:3) to the end (Mal 4:3) and continually throughout, this is what OT Scripture asserts about itself.

The phrase “the Word of God” also occurs over 40 times 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; 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 (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35, 36), second (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11), and third missionary journeys (Acts 19:10). It was what James commanded his readers to apply (Jas 1:22), and what Peter, John, and Jude condemned the false teachers for twisting and obscuring (cf. 2 Pet 3:16; 2 John 9; Jude 4). Both the OT prophets and NT apostles took the inspired writings of Scripture seriously, because they understood them to be the very Word of God.

What does all this have to do with biblical clarity? Simply this: In Scripture, the person of God and the Word of God are everywhere interrelated, so much so that whatever is true about the character of God is true about the nature of God’s Word. Thus, to deny the clarity of Scripture is to call into question God’s ability to communicate clearly. But by affirming the fact that the Bible’s message is inherently understandable, the doctrine of perspicuity rightly acknowledges that the Spirit of God has revealed divine truth in a comprehensible form.

It is because “the words of Scripture are objectively God’s revelation, [that] one person can point to the content of the Bible in seeking to demonstrate to another

what the correct understanding is.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, because God’s revelation is clear,

Scripture can be and is read with profit, with appreciation and with transformative results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture’s concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. It displays a progressively more specific identification of that story, culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about.<sup>58</sup>

This does not mean that the Bible is without “some things hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:16). The doctrine of perspicuity does not demand that every Bible passage be equally straightforward or equally simple as to its precise meaning. Sometimes correct understanding requires comparing one passage with another. As Augustine wrote,

Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

Nor does it negate the necessity of interpretation, explanation, and exposition by Bible teachers (cf. Luke 24:27; Acts 8:30-31). In fact, a primary qualification for the NT elder is his ability to teach the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9).

So what then is meant by the clarity of Scripture? Larry Pettegrew, in his helpful article, identifies at least eight aspects of this orthodox Christian doctrine.<sup>60</sup>

First, it means that Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by. Psalm 19:7b notes, “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” In contrast to the insecure and wavering notions of men, the Word of the living God is sure, meaning immovable and reliable. The Word then provides a foundation on which life and eternal destiny can be built without hesitation. Ps 119:130 echoes the fact that “The unfolding of Thy words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” Wayne Grudem comments, “Here the ‘simple’ person (Heb. *peti*) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God’s Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it.”<sup>61</sup> Robert Raymond explains,

For example, one does not need to be ‘learned,’ when reading the Gospels or hearing them read or proclaimed, to discover that they intend to teach that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, performed mighty miracles, died on the cross ‘as a ransom for many,’ and rose from the dead on the third day after death. These things are plain, lying

<sup>57</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 279.

<sup>58</sup>James Patrick Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001) 9.

<sup>59</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958) 38.

<sup>60</sup>Larry D. Pettegrew, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” *TMSJ* 15/2 (Fall 2004):209-25.

<sup>61</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 106.

on the very face of the Gospels.<sup>62</sup>

Second, on the other hand, perspicuity means that the Bible is deep enough for readers of the highest intellectual ability. As R. A. Torrey wrote one hundred years ago,

The Bible is unfathomable. Whatever man has produced, man can exhaust, but no man, no generation of men, not all the tens of thousands of men together that have devoted their best abilities and the best years of their lives to the study of this book, have been able to exhaust this book. Men of the best minds that the world has ever known, men of widest culture, men of rarest intellectual grasp, men of keenest insight and profoundest ability have dug into the book for years and years, and the more they dig, the deeper they saw the depth still below them to be and the richer the golden ore.<sup>63</sup>

Thomas Scott, who preceded Torrey, similarly noted, “The things that are absolutely necessary to salvation, are few, simple, and obvious to the meanest capacity, provided it be attended by a humble teachable disposition: but the most learned, acute, and diligent student cannot, in the longest life, obtain an entire knowledge of this one volume.”<sup>64</sup>

Third, perspicuity means that Scripture is clear in essential matters. Scripture, “in any faithful translation, is sufficiently perspicuous (clear) to show us our sinfulness, the basic facts of the gospel, what we must do if we are to be part of the family of God, and how to live.”<sup>65</sup> That is to say that the good news of salvation is clear. The message of verses like John 3:16 and Rom 3:23 is not hopelessly complex, but is lucid and straightforward so that God can rightly hold men accountable to it.

Fourth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that the obscurity that a reader of the Bible may find in some parts of Scripture is the fault of finite and sinful mankind. Grudem explains,

In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the Gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying anything like this: “I see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject.” Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. Again and again he answers questions with statements like, “Have you not read ...” (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:14; 22:31), “Have you never read in the Scriptures ...” (Matt. 21:42), or even, “You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29; cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.).<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup>Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 88.

<sup>63</sup>R.A. Torrey, *The Divine Origin of the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899) 38.

<sup>64</sup>Thomas Scott, “Preface to *Thomas Scott's Commentary on the Bible*.” This preface, first published in 1804, was often placed in the front of Bibles, as an introduction to the text.

<sup>65</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Legitimate Hermeneutics,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 128.

<sup>66</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 106.

The blame must not be on the Scriptures themselves, but upon finite, sinful man.

Fifth, perspicuity means that interpreters of Scripture must use ordinary means. Because the Holy Spirit used ordinary men to communicate His message through the normal means of grammar and syntax, biblical interpreters must seek to understand that message via the same means. Thus, “if an interpreter properly follows what has been called ‘the laws of language,’ or ‘the rights of language,’ he can know what the Scriptures specifically mean.”<sup>67</sup>

Sixth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that even an unsaved person can understand the plain teachings of Scripture on an external level. Though he may not submit to the teaching of Scripture or understand its true significance, he is able to comprehend the gospel message. A passage like 1 Cor 2:14 does not teach that unbelievers cannot understand any part of the Bible, but rather that they cannot properly appreciate and apply it without the illumination of the Spirit. As a matter of fact, unsaved man “will be judged for rejecting that which Scripture itself declares should be abundantly clear to them, because they refuse to receive it.”<sup>68</sup> Reymond writes,

One does not need to be instructed by a preacher to learn that he must believe on Jesus in order to be saved from the penalty his sins deserve. (This includes the unbeliever, who is certainly capable of following an argument.) All one needs to do in order to discover these things, to put it plainly, is to sit down in a fairly comfortable chair, open the Gospels, and with a good reading lamp, read the Gospels like he would read any other book.<sup>69</sup>

Seventh, perspicuity means that the Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of Scripture if he is to understand the significance of Scripture. This is the correct understanding of 1 Cor 2:14.

Finally, the perspicuity of Scripture means that in accordance with the priesthood of the believer, every Christian has both the privilege and the responsibility to read and interpret the Bible for himself, so that his faith rests on the authority of Scripture and not the authority of the church or any other institution. There are no church officers, class of clergy members, or Bible expositors to whose interpretation of the Scriptures lay Christians are required to submit as a final authority.

To summarize,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for Salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 98.

<sup>68</sup>Kaiser, “Legitimate Hermeneutics” 123.

<sup>69</sup>Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* 88.

<sup>70</sup>Second London Confession of Faith, 1,7.

### **A Final Word**

The doctrine of biblical perspicuity is critical to the life and mission of the church. If believers cannot know with any degree of assurance that they are accurately understanding God's Word, they have no hope of rightly applying divine instruction in their everyday lives. A Bible that is ambiguous can produce only doctrine that is equally indefensible, since no sure argument can be made from any given text. But this is not how the Scripture describes itself. All men are responsible to submit to Scripture. And all believers are commanded to know, defend, and apply sound doctrine. Biblical clarity provides the foundation for such a mandate.

The Bible not only sets forth its own clarity in such a way that men are held accountable for what it says (Rom 1:18–2:16; cf. Deut 11:28; 28:62; Judg 6:10; 1 Sam 12:15; Jer 3:25; 44:23; Dan 9:11). It also explains why false teachers would want to obscure the plainness of the message. Jesus Himself rightly diagnosed the reason people reject the clarity of Scripture when He said,

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:19-21)

And Paul would later write, of those who are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7), that they were “lovers of self” (v. 2), “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (v. 4), who possessed “a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (v. 5). Denying Scripture's clarity is a convenient escape from the responsibility to obey God's very clear commands and a provision for guilt-free sin. Rather than listening to the folly of such men, Paul encouraged Timothy with these words:

[A]nd that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:15-17)

May those words continue to ring true in the hearts of all who know the Lord and love His Word.

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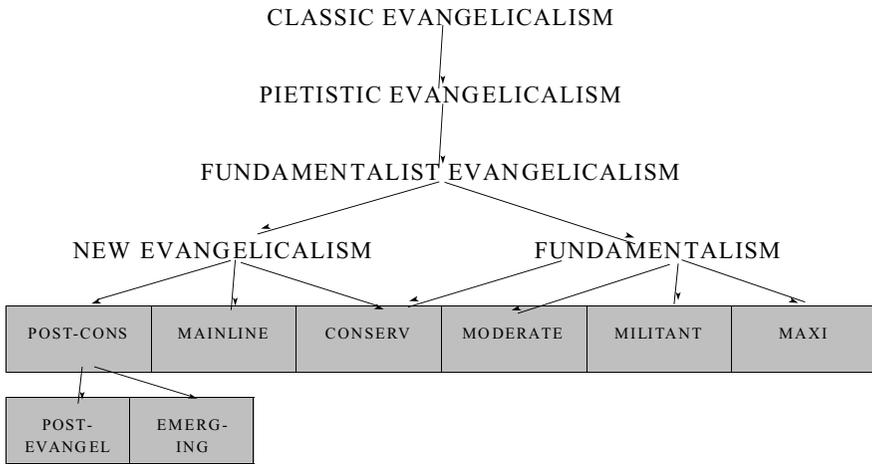
Hell,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1998):205-17.

<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

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<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.sbcbaptistpress.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

<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.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup>The 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.

<sup>3</sup>"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.<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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

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

<sup>5</sup>Eddie 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.<sup>6</sup> Disillusionment set in.<sup>7</sup>

Were a sermon-like proposition to be crafted for this essay, it perhaps would be this: A fourfold redrafting<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup>Dave 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.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>8</sup>Using the participle to indicate that the theology is in the process of being formulated.

<sup>9</sup>Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 11.

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

<sup>11</sup>Leonard 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> “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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> If *eternal life* in John’s Gospel

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 186-87.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 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).

<sup>14</sup>Tomlinson, *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.

<sup>15</sup>Refer 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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?"<sup>20</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 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."

<sup>18</sup>See 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).

<sup>19</sup>Brian 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

<sup>20</sup>McLaren, *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.”<sup>21</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches* 63.

after death.<sup>22</sup>

### **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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup>

#### **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.<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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

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<sup>22</sup>McLaren, *Last Word* 150.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>24</sup>Robert 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.

<sup>25</sup>Steve 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.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

### 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.<sup>32</sup> 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

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<sup>27</sup>Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* 100-101.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>McLaren, *The Story* 105-6.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>32</sup>Tomlinson, *Post-Evangelical* 101.

the substitutionary model.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

### 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.<sup>36</sup> 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

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

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>35</sup>Carson, *Becoming Conversant* 168.

<sup>36</sup>McLaren, *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."<sup>37</sup>
- 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?

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<sup>37</sup>Alva 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?”<sup>38</sup> 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?<sup>39</sup>

#### 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”<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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

<sup>38</sup>McLaren, , *Generous Orthodoxy* 37.

<sup>39</sup>McLaren, *Last Word* xii.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 69-81, 121.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 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.<sup>43</sup>

### **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.<sup>44</sup>

### **Short Retort**

The Bible is seen to be “horribly disappointing as a modern-style technical textbook, even for theology.”<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.

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

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

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 99, and for the complete listing, 96-103.

<sup>46</sup>See 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.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Don Closson, “The Emerging Church,” at [http://www.probe.org/index2.pp?com\\_content&task=view&id=1279&Itemid=77](http://www.probe.org/index2.pp?com_content&task=view&id=1279&Itemid=77), accessed 1/27/2006.

## **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), Brueggeman (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, *ekkēsia*). 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* (Fear, 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).

## PROGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE & PREACHING: ARE THEY THE SAME?

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*Under the influence of postmodernism and postconservatism, the Emerging Church is engaged in dismantling much of present-day worship practices in the local church. A leader in advocating radical changes in conventional preaching is Doug Pagitt in his book Preaching Re-Imagined. Pagitt's name for traditional preaching is "speaching," which he sees as totally inadequate to meet needs in the Christian community, because it is a one-way communication that does not allow for the listeners' input. His preferred alternative is "progressional dialogue" which involves "intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints." As he sees the goal, the Bible is not the sole repository of truth. The Christian community has an equal contribution to make. Influences that have shaped Pagitt's thinking include the Christian/cosmic metanarrative, postfoundationalism, and outcome-based church ministry. The inevitable conclusion must be that progressional dialogue is not really preaching as preaching has been defined biblically and historically.*

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Preaching is public hermeneutics. It reflects what are the preacher's fundamental interpretations of his world, his task, his people, and most important, his Bible. How he handles the Bible in the pulpit becomes the exemplar for how the congregation approaches it at home. Church history is an undeniable testimony that the pulpit is the rudder for the church.

The Emerging Church (hereafter, EC)<sup>1</sup> phenomenon is distinguished by its

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<sup>1</sup>Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, Emerging Church proponents, offer this definition of emerging churches: "Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities" (Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005] 44-45). "Emerging" churches are not necessarily synonymous with "emergent" churches. The term "emergent" refers to those associated or aligned with Emergent Village. Not all those who consider themselves "emerging" identify with the "emergent" wing of the movement. See Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 22.

iconoclastic dismantling of accepted worship forms. Every nuance of ecclesiology is being questioned and reconsidered under the twin-lens microscope of postmodernism<sup>2</sup> (culturally) and postconservatism<sup>3</sup> (theologically). That preaching too is receiving a theological, philosophical, and methodological facelift from leaders in the EC movement should surprise no one. Doug Pagitt has utilized the most creative and skilled scalpel on the traditional view of preaching. As a part of the “Organizing Group” in the Emergent Village, Pagitt has been pastor of Solomon's Porch, a Holistic, Missional Christian Community in Minneapolis, since its inception in January 2000.

Pagitt issues his challenge to conventional preaching in *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), a part of Zondervan's expanding library of EC articulations and resources. To date, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (hereafter, *PR-I*) is the EC's most definitive voice on preaching.

Not all who identify with the EC would subscribe to Pagitt's homiletical theories. The EC is not a monolithic movement.<sup>4</sup> Describing preaching in the Emerging Church movement is tantamount to reaching definitive conclusions about speeches in the Democratic Party. No matter what conclusions anyone offers, exceptions can be cited. And generalizations are just that, generalizations.

However, Doug Pagitt has made a significant contribution to the EC conversation. Unfortunately, most of this conversation emerges on the Internet. Changes, updates, additions, revisions, reversals, and clarifications to much EC thinking happens rapidly in cyberspace. On January 11, 2006, Pagitt himself wrote,

<sup>2</sup>D. A. Carson provides this definition of postmodernism in the context of the Emerging Church: “[T]he fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is *epistemology*—i.e., how we know things. Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affective—which in turn breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we “know” is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right. Modernism tries to find unquestioned foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge and then proceeds with methodological rigor; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist (it is “antifoundational”) and insists that we come to “know” things in many ways, not a few of them lacking in rigor. Modernism is hard-edged and, in the domain of religion, focuses on truth versus error, right belief, confessionalism; postmodernism is gentle and, in the domain of religion, focuses on relationships, love, shared tradition, integrity in discussion” (D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005] 27).

<sup>3</sup>Justin Taylor writes, “. . . [A] significant shift is taking place in some segments of evangelicalism. The proponents of this perspective have assumed various connotations—postconservatives, reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists, postfoundationalists, postpropositionalists, postevangelicals—but they all bear a family resemblance and can be grouped together as having a number of common characteristics. They are self-professed evangelicals seeking to revision the theology, renew the center, transform the worshipping community of evangelicalism, cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live” (Justin Taylor, “An Introduction to Postconservatism and the Rest of This Book,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004] 17-18).

<sup>4</sup>For example, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, preaches in a way that could be classified easily under the historic understanding of Protestant homiletics of which Doug Pagitt is so critical. Driscoll's sermon downloads are available at [www.marshillchurch.org](http://www.marshillchurch.org).

“I think blogs are adding to a culture of misunderstanding.”<sup>5</sup> But in *PR-I* Pagitt has helpfully cemented his thoughts on the printed page, rather than in a blog to follow. Both Pagitt’s critics and sympathizers should be grateful for his book.

In *PR-I* Pagitt questions conventional definitions and practices of preaching. With only four works cited,<sup>6</sup> he admittedly paves new roads in homiletical theory.<sup>7</sup>

### *Speaching vs. Progressional Dialogue*

In 1928 Harry Emerson Fosdick published an essay in *Harper’s Magazine* entitled: “What’s Wrong With Preaching?” This leader of liberalism was calling for preaching that was more relevant, involving more of the experiences of the congregation. Fosdick wrote,

Many preachers . . . indulge habitually in what they call expository sermons. They take a passage from Scripture and, proceeding on the assumption that the people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means, they spend their half hour or more on historical exposition of the verse or chapter, ending with some appended practical application to the auditors. Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility? Who seriously supposes that, as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul, or John meant in those special verses, or came to church deeply concerned about it? Nobody else who talks to the public so assumes that the vital interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago.<sup>8</sup>

Fosdick’s conclusion was that propositional preaching, sourced in biblical data, was irrelevant. But he went further. The method of sermonic transmission (i.e., giving a speech) was problematic as well. Note his prophetic vision in 1928:

Their method [i.e. conventional preaching], however, has long since lost its influence over intelligent people, and the future does not belong to it. The future, I think, belongs to a type of sermon which can best be described as an adventure in co-operative thinking between the preacher and his congregation.

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<sup>5</sup>Interestingly, I tried to access this statement again when writing this article (July/August of 2006). It has already disappeared. Pagitt made this statement in the context of announcing that he would “stop using [his] blog for the sharing of ideas.” Further, he wrote, “I am convinced that in the circles I run in the use of blogs to share ideas and thoughts for the world to pick apart, misunderstand and use for their own benefit does not lead to a better world of deeper understanding. It is a negative force in the process of creating more open and interesting dialog.” These comments were posted under the heading “Blog Announcement,” on January 11, 2006 and found at <http://pagitt.typepad.com>, accessed 1/11/06.

<sup>6</sup>Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 229.

<sup>7</sup>Though his homiletical ideas have unique nuances, Pagitt is not the only or the first to propose a collaborative process between the pastor and the faith community for sermonic production and delivery. Cf. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997); John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Preaching and Leadership Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What is the Matter with Preaching?,” in *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 9.

The lecture method of instruction is no longer in the ascendant. To be sure, there are subjects which must be handled by the positive setting forth of information in a lecture, but more and more, good teaching is discussional, co-operative. The instructor does not think so much for the students but with them.

A wise preacher can so build his sermon that it will be, not a dogmatic monologue but a co-operative dialogue in which all sorts of things in the minds of the congregation—objections, questions, doubts, and confirmations—will be brought to the front and fairly dealt with.<sup>9</sup>

The trajectory of preaching, according to Fosdick, should be away from giving a sermonic speech and toward a “discussional, co-operative model.” The fulfillment of his homiletical hopes and ideas are realized in Pagitt’s *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

### **The Problem of *Speaching* (i.e., Historic Preaching) According to Pagitt**

Like Fosdick, Pagitt is concerned about what is going on today in the name of preaching. The title of his book is a bit softer than the substance. In the title he indicates that he wants to “re-imagine” what preaching is. But in the opening chapter he confesses that he is actually “redefining” what preaching really is. He writes,

As the pastor I’m often referred to as “the preacher.” And frankly, this is a role I no longer relish. There was a time when I did. There was a time when I felt my ability to deliver sermons was a high calling I sought to refine but didn’t need to redefine.

Those days are gone. Now I find myself regularly redefining my role and the role of preaching (*Pr-I*, 10).<sup>10</sup>

The form of preaching to which Pagitt is averse is *speaching*, a term he created (11-12). His definition of *speaching* is “the style of preaching that is hardly distinguishable from a one-way speech” (11-12). The term has an intended pejorative connotation. Pagitt explains:

Throughout this book, I will use the term *speaching* to discuss the ways in which preaching has degraded into speech making. I use this word to distinguish *speaching*, which I believe to be a form of speaking that is inconsistent with the outcomes we want to see arise from our preaching, from the act of preaching, which I believe to be a good, right, and essential calling of the church (48).

He concludes that as “*speaching*,” “preaching doesn’t work” (18) and it is “a tragically broken endeavor” (19). But that is not all. In Pagitt’s estimation, *speaching* has serious consequences. He describes the dangers of *speaching* with dramatic language. The alarming nature of these statements is amplified by the fact that they implicate twenty centuries of Christian preaching. Here are some of Pagitt’s critical comments about *speaching* (i.e., the historic mode of preaching).

“bondage” (18), “an ineffectual means of communication” (22), something “to protect

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>10</sup>All page numbers in subsequent parentheses refer to *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

our communities from” (25), like “a repetitive stress disorder” (25), “an act of relational violence” (26), the cause of “a certain misunderstanding about God, faith, life, authority, and power that is detrimental to the message we are attempting to live and communicate as pastors” (51), “a subtle form of manipulation” (72, 74), “not a sustainable way for the church to minister” (76), “dehumanizing” (76), “a violation of what we know about building relationships” (82), equivalent in impact to a “bumper sticker” (83), “arrogant enough to presume to know ...” how a grieving couple could deal with pain (87), “not good for the good news” (131), “not a sustainable means for building Christian communities who seek to live in harmony with God, each other, and the world” (162),<sup>11</sup> “failing to accomplish much of anything” (163), and “disruptive to the creation of communities of faith” (175).

Such statements call into question the sincerity of Pagitt’s caveat elsewhere: “But it’s important to keep in mind that I see the problem of speaking as more of a low-grade fever than a medical emergency” (76).<sup>12</sup> Low-grade fevers call for minimal treatment, but Pagitt suggests a full-scale transplant, with another mode of sermonizing replacing the diseased mode of speaking.

In chapter 13 he cites D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as an example of speaking. This five-and-a-half page chapter is interesting for several reasons. Almost three pages is a quotation from Lloyd-Jones’ 1972 book *Preaching and Preachers*. The quotation highlights Lloyd-Jones’ priority of preaching (or speaking) in the church. Admittedly critical of such a priority, Pagitt fails to supply any meaningful interaction with the quotation provided except to say that he disagrees.<sup>13</sup> He simply advises the reader, “If one were convinced of [Lloyd-Jones’] perspective, one might be better served by drawing from the vast resources devoted to refining the role of Reformed preaching than spending time in this book” (117).

The only criticism of Lloyd-Jones’ model comes in chapter 14. Pagitt believes that “this kind of emphasis on preaching is drawn from a far too limited view of the work of the church and far too heightened understanding of preaching” (119). He attributes this wrong understanding of the pulpit to the preacher’s fear of being wrong. However, Paul told Timothy to pay close attention to his life and to his teaching because heaven and hell are at stake in sermonic hearing (1 Tim 4:16). And the apostle warns that God Himself will hold preachers accountable to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:1-2). According to Paul, Lloyd-Jones was right to show the

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<sup>11</sup>Pagitt qualifies this comment in context: “My contention is that speaking, while perhaps a reasonable way to deliver a broad message to a broad group of people, is not a sustainable means for building Christian communities who seek to live in harmony with God, each other, and the world. I am not suggesting a move to progressional preaching as the sole means to this end—it will take a comprehensive approach—but I do believe that only when we change our ideas about speaking will we change the ways our communities articulate, express, and embody the hopeful message of God” (*PR-I* 162).

<sup>12</sup>Pagitt also says, “There are really good, intelligent people who hold a view on the function of preaching in the church that is very different from mine. But I’m not trying to convince people that speaking is a failure as much as I’m trying to provide a new way of thinking for those who’ve already concluded such but don’t have the words to go with their intuition” (*PR-I* 114). It is difficult to reconcile the list of criticisms above and Pagitt’s statement that he is not trying to convince people that speaking is a failure.

<sup>13</sup>He states, “I won’t take the time to refute the thoughts presented by Dr. Lloyd-Jones other than to say that his view of preaching bears little resemblance to mine and to further suggest that those who are convinced of his position are not likely to find value in my ideas about preaching” (*PR-I* 117).

importance and gravity of the pulpit.

### **Pagitt's Alternative to *Speaching*: *Progressional Dialogue***

In lieu of *speaching* (historic preaching), Pagitt offers *progressional dialogue* as a better mode of preaching. By *progressional dialogue*—another term he made up (11)—he means that people in a church meeting sit in a group with equal opportunity to talk/preach about their personal story with God or perspective on a given biblical text. Pagitt defines his new homiletical conception with these descriptions:

Progressional dialogue. . . involves the intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas. The message will change depending on who is present and who says what. This kind of preaching is dynamic in the sense that the outcome is determined on the spot by the participants (52).

This is my hope for what preaching can be: the mutual admonition of one another in life with God. . . I'm not suggesting we become a people who spend less time telling the story, less time talking or less time leading one another, but certainly less time using one-way communication as our primary means of talking about and thinking about the gospel (26).

In *Church Re-Imagined*, he describes it this way:

At Solomon's Porch, sermons are not primarily about my extracting truth from the Bible to apply to people's lives. In many ways the sermon is less a lecture or motivational speech than it is an act of poetry—of putting words around people's experiences to allow them to find deeper connection to their lives. As we read through sections of the Bible and see how God has interacted with people in other times and places, we better sense God interacting with us. So our sermons are not lessons that precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of shaping the theological direction through instruction, the sermon/progressional dialogue allows multiple viewpoints of the participants to change perspectives of others.<sup>15</sup>

For Pagitt the sermon is a dialogue with those who show up at the church gathering. But this dialogue is not without preparation. Members of the spiritual community are invited on Tuesday night to talk through Bible passages. In the intervening five days, the discussion held on Tuesday evening provokes thinking that leads to better conversation on Sunday. *Progressional dialogue* is the result, a communal sermon. Brian McLaren agrees with the conversational flavor of Pagitt's

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<sup>14</sup>Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 166.

<sup>15</sup>The way *progressional dialogue* is presented, it is difficult not to understand it as a collage of opinions. However, Pagitt insists, "Progressional preaching is not opinion gathering. It's perspective altering. We invite other opinions to be heard not simply so they'll feel "listened to" but because we all need to hear what is being said. We listen to each other with the understanding that the comments of others force us to be involved in the real world of their experiences. The reason we listen is not only for their benefit, but also for ours" (*PR-I* 175).

emerging homiletic: “I’ve found that the more my preaching mirrors the flow of a conversation, the more people connect with it.”<sup>16</sup> In Emerging terminology, progressional dialogue is the ultimate conversation for spiritual transformation in the community of faith.

Pagitt sees the Christian community as the starting point for theology. The Bible is a part, but only as “an authoritative member of the community” (31, 195). Like Stanley Grenz, he understands this community as “an experience-facilitating interpretive framework.”<sup>17</sup> The community is the starting point and the hermeneutical grid for both experience and Scripture. This is the outgrowth of a drastic postconservative turn. As Kwabena Donkor remarks, “The fundamental implication of this communitarian turn is that the believing Christian community becomes the matrix out of which theological expression is brought forth.”<sup>18</sup>

### Philosophical Roots of Progressional Dialogue

Progressional dialogue is the resultant method of Doug Pagitt’s theological and ideological presuppositions. Identifying these pillars is not an easy task. Since Pagitt is a practitioner, his underlying belief system/worldview is concealed in method more than articulated in theory. Nevertheless, the following influences seem to shape his development of progressional dialogue.

#### The Christian/Cosmic Metanarrative

One of the recurring themes in the EC is the “story of God” (e.g., *PR-I*, 10-11). Pagitt believes telling the story of God in communities of faith is the right impulse of the church (18) and a goal of preaching (30). The nature of this story of God is not always clear. Robert E. Webber explains: “We Christians say that the biblical story is not one story that runs along other stories. It is not a relative story. It is an all-encompassing story for all people in all places and in all times.”<sup>19</sup> Add to this Pagitt’s unqualified statement: “Being part of a global, pluralistic world is a great gift to the church, for our role in ministry is not to push the agenda of our clan but to recognize and join in the life of God wherever we find it” (125).

Such statements contain disturbingly inclusive language for those who believe the gospel to be exclusive. What does it mean that God’s story is “an all encompassing story for all people in all places at all times”? What does it mean that religious pluralism is a “great gift to the church”?

In the same context Pagitt asserts,

The benefit to living in this time and place is that we have access to an amazing variety of ways to understand, connect with, and grow in God (125).

Because each of us has a personal relationship with God, it makes sense that each of us

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<sup>16</sup>Brian McLaren, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” in *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors*, ed. Michael Dudit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 119.

<sup>17</sup>Kwabena Donkor, “Postconservatism: A Third World Perspective,” in *Reclaiming the Center* 201.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>19</sup>Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 84.

would have a personal understanding of God (125).

In other words, God can be understood in as many ways as there are people. This highlights experience and derogates Scripture as God's self-revelation. Connection with this supposed metanarrative raises the question of the meaning of the gospel/salvation. Pagitt rejects the concept that the gospel is propositional truth to be believed. Instead, it is entering into the broader story of God in the world. The gospel itself needs to be "re-imagined." Pagitt muses,

It seems to me that this call to communal spiritual formation challenges us to *re-imagine the gospel itself* [emphasis added]. Perhaps the challenges of living the dreams of God in the post-industrial world go beyond methodology problems. Perhaps we have been propagating a limited message, reducing biblical authors to sound bytes that cut the gospel message into so many pieces that we are left with little more than statements of what we believe rather than the broader story of how we are to enter into God's story through a life lived in faith.<sup>20</sup>

The doorway for entering into God's story is subjective experience, found in the lives of self and others. Accordingly, Pagitt writes, "Every person has experience, understanding, and perspective; there is no one who is totally devoid of truth"—including unbelievers (139). With regard to progressional dialogue, it seems that anyone who comes to the gathering, even the unregenerate, is invited to enter into the preaching community through progressional dialogue. Pagitt says,

We listen to unbelievers on everything from the way we spend our money and how we educate our children to the way we care for our bodies and how we interact with the environment. So when the church maintains practices that silence the unbeliever, we reinforce the idea that preaching is intended for the safety of the church, not to help us connect with the full spectrum of our lives (224).

Unbelieving preachers? That *is* a new kind of preaching model.

Apparently the biblical qualifications for ecclesiastical leadership and spiritual instruction (e.g., 1 Tim 3:1-8) are nullified by the universality of participation in God's story. "We aren't people simply listening or talking," says Pagitt, "We are people entering into the story of God's work in the world and seeking our place in it."<sup>21</sup> It seems that anyone and everyone are parts of God's story, making them able preachers in the progressional dialogue model.

### **Postfoundationalism**

As a postconservative,<sup>22</sup> Pagitt demonstrably reveals postfoundational thinking. Both sides of the EC debate, sympathetic and critical, agree that

<sup>20</sup>Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 31.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>22</sup>The terms Pagitt actually imbibes are post-evangelical, post-liberal, post-industrialized, and post-protestant (Ibid., 45). Each term fits the ideology of postconservatism.

postfoundationalism is a core conviction of Emerging epistemology.<sup>23</sup> “Post-foundationalism asserts that Christianity can stand on its own; it needs no rational defense,” says Webber.<sup>24</sup> As attractive as this first sounds, the legs on which postfoundationalism faith stands are experience and community, while jettisoning the Bible’s intrinsic foundations of truth (primarily that of inerrancy).<sup>25</sup>

Pagitt’s postfoundationalism shows up in his statements about the Bible. Perhaps his clearest loyalty to postfoundationalism is in *Church Re-Imagined*:

At bottom, our trust in the Bible does not depend on information that “proves” the Bible to be credible. We believe the Bible because our hopes, ideas, experiences, and community of faith allow and require us to believe.<sup>26</sup>

In *PR-I* he adds,

I truly believe progressional dialogue is necessary to move people into fuller, richer lives of faith. People’s lives are not changed by the information they get. Lives are changed by new situations, new practices, and new ways of experiencing the world (163).

In other words, faith rests on an apologetic of subjectivism and experience, not reason. Webber explains, “[T]ruth is not proven, it is embodied by individuals and by the community known as the church.”<sup>27</sup>

This important perspective explains Pagitt’s view of Scripture in his progressional dialogue homiletic. In his authority construct, subjective experience is promoted to divine fiat while Scripture is demoted to community member. The pews become pulpits as the Bible is escorted to take a seat in a pew. Here is this leveling in Pagitt’s own words:

The Bible is more than a source of our faith. The Bible ought to live as an authoritative member of our community, one to whom we listen on all topics of which she speaks. Speaching takes the Bible away from the hearers—many of whom are already intimidated by the Bible—and reminds them they are not in a position to speak on how they are implicated by this story (31).

[Note that the Bible is *an* authoritative member, not *the* authoritative member.]

Progressional dialogue creates a relationship in which the Bible becomes a living member of the community....When this happens, the Bible becomes a part of our conversation,

<sup>23</sup>See chapter 6 in Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*; Stanley J. Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise” in *Reclaiming the Center*, and Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. These are merely examples of some of the more popular works discussing the importance of postfoundationalism to the philosophical infrastructure of EC.

<sup>24</sup>Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* 99.

<sup>25</sup>Moreland and DeWeese provide an apologetic for inerrancy in this context (“The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise” 105-7).

<sup>26</sup>Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 168.

<sup>27</sup>Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* 101.

not a dead book from which I extract truth (44).

The Bible ought to live as an authoritative member of our community, one we listen to on all topics of which she speaks. Understanding the Bible as a community member means giving the Bible the freedom to speak for herself. Sometimes that will mean getting out of the way and putting less effort into interpreting Scripture for others, instead letting them carry out their own relationship with what the Bible says (195).

For every generation of Christians before the modern era the Bible was something they listened to, making them more adept at listening to each other. Now that we read the Bible, we tend to think of it as being in a different class from the Word of God still living in our brothers and sisters. There is a strong tendency to take what we see in the Bible and allow it to trump the validity of what we hear in history and in one another (218).

Should we not find a more integrated and honored place for the testimony of our people? This testimony can certainly move beyond our simple conversion stories that have become trite and overused in some traditions. This testimony can and should be offered in narratives as complex as the Bible itself. It can and should be listened to with the same sense of respect and reverence as the Bible itself (218-19).

This final quotation sums it up—people’s testimonies “should be listened to with the same sense of respect and reverence as the Bible itself.” No wonder Pagitt has reconstructed the sermon as conversation. If personal testimony is on level with the written Word of God—i.e., not to be trumped by Scripture (review the second to last quotation)—then conversation becomes the viable object of exegesis and exposition along with its community member—the Bible. Ergo, progressional dialogue: the homiletical conversation in the Emerging Church. The apostle Peter dramatically contradicts the notion that personal testimony rises to the “respect and reverence” of Scripture. Few could extol their experience with the story of God more than this Galilean fisherman. Along with James and John, he witnessed the glory and majesty of the incarnate God on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Yet when discussing this event in 2 Pet 1:16-21, Peter confessed that Scripture is “more sure” (v. 19, βεβαίωτερον, lit. “more firm, more secure, more trustworthy”) than experience—even his own experience of eye-witnessing divine majesty.

For Pagitt the Bible raises its hand in a conversation, politely waiting until it is called upon to speak. However, in history the Bible has been the thunder of God for reformation, revival, and regeneration.

### **Outcome-Based Church Ministry<sup>28</sup>**

Pagitt joins every other pastor in his desire for people to change as a result of his ministry. He comments, “The value of our practices—including preaching—ought to be judged by their effects on our communities and the ways in which

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<sup>28</sup>I am indebted to Scott McKnight in his blog thread for crystallizing this influence in Pagitt’s thinking. McKnight wrote, “So, let me make a proposal that I think Pagitt forces us to consider: what would our churches be like if we developed an ‘Outcome-Based Church Ministry’? First, we’d need to discuss very carefully what our desired outcomes are” (<http://www.jesuscreeed.org/?p=346>, accessed 9/28/06).

they help us move toward life with God” (28).<sup>29</sup> Again, he believes a primary deterrent to life-change in a faith community to be speaking, which he believes “to be a form of speaking that is inconsistent with the outcomes we want to see arise from our preaching” (48).

The reason he provides for the bankruptcy of speaking is that it uses knowledge as its agent for transformation. Pagitt confesses,

I have become convinced that our misguided belief that life change can come through proper knowledge acquired through education has failed to produce the kind of radical commitment to life in harmony with God and the way of Jesus that we are called to.<sup>30</sup>

The impotent “knowledge” Pagitt criticizes is the information presented in speaking, i.e., propositional preaching. For evangelicals,<sup>31</sup> this corpus of knowledge is rooted in the knowledge of God obtained from the Bible. Pagitt’s “misguided belief” that knowledge can produce change and radical commitment disregards the apostle Peter’s divinely inspired words to the contrary. Peter explains that knowledge is indeed a biblical agent for change.

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who has called us by His own glory and excellence (2 Pet 1:2-3).<sup>32</sup>

In John 17:3 Jesus defined eternal life itself in the rubric of epistemology: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

A simple survey of the book of Proverbs yields the conclusion that knowledge is not only valuable, but essential to growth in faith. Spiritual knowledge originates from God and points back to God. Proverbs 2:6 reads, “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.” Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Additionally, Proverbs accents the importance of spiritual knowledge with a variety of other prescriptions and descriptions (consider: 1:7, 22, 29; 2:5, 10; 8:9, 10, 12; 10:14; 11:9; 12:23; 13:16; 14:6, 18; 15:14; 18:15; 19:2; 20:15; 22:12; 23:12; 24:4, 5).

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<sup>29</sup>Douglas Groothuis argues, “the meaning of truth cannot be a belief’s usefulness, even though some beliefs are more useful or fruitful than others” (“Truth Defined and Defended,” in *Reclaiming the Center* 76). He bases this conclusion on the correspondence theory of truth, described and defended in the referenced chapter.

<sup>30</sup>Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 21.

<sup>31</sup>Pagitt admits his shift away from evangelicalism. He writes, “I have no regrets over my experience with the evangelical faith community. I will be ever grateful to the institutions and people who invested so much in me; yet my life experiences have led me to desire ways of Christianity beyond the practices and beliefs of my beginning. I began wondering if my experience as an evangelical was a great place for me to start but not a sufficient place for me to finish. Solomon’s Porch was fueled by a desire to find a new way of life with Jesus, in community with others, that honored my past and moved boldly into the future” (*Church Re-Imagined* 43).

<sup>32</sup>Extended Scripture quotations are from The New American Standard Bible Update.

In the NT also, knowledge is given preeminence for change and growth. Jesus is the personal reservoir of knowledge (Col 2:3); God desires all men to come to knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4); knowledge is the bridge for believing the gospel and living a godly life (Titus 1:1); knowledge is the impetus for overwhelming worship (Rom 11:33); and knowledge is the basis for love (Phil 1:9). Conversely, Paul warned against having a zeal for God without a commensurate knowledge (Rom 10:2), and sought to destroy any speculative thought against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5). And the great commission implies a body of knowledge to be transferred in gospel ministry (i.e., teaching believers to observe all that Jesus commanded, Matt 28:18-20).

With his outcome-based conviction, Pagitt proposes that a faith built on experience is superior to a faith built on knowledge. He writes, "When we move from belief-based faith to life-lived, holistic faith, the only true test is lives lived over time."<sup>33</sup> Yet Jesus himself said that faith is to be belief-based "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who *believe* in His name (John 1:12, emphasis added; also John 3:16).

### Is Progressional Dialogue Really Preaching?

The bottom-line question is, "Is progressional dialogue really preaching?" Semantics determine the answer. Obviously, Doug Pagitt believes his conversational homiletic qualifies. But does progressional dialogue measure up to the tests of Scripture and church history?

#### Progressional Dialogue and the Bible

English translations render only a few Hebrew words as "preach." Primary is the hiphil of נָטַף (*nāṭap*), meaning to "drop, distill, prophesy, or preach" (e.g., Ezek 20:46; 21:2, Amos 7:16; Mic 2:6, 11). In Ecclesiastes נְתַנֵּן (*qōḥelet*) is used seven times and rendered "preacher." Also, בָּשַׂר (*bašar*) is used with the sense of "proclaiming good news" (1 Kgs 1:42; Jer 20:15). The context of these words is overwhelmingly a public speaking event, typically one commanded by the Lord.

The NT uses some fourteen Greek terms for "preach." But two word-groups are the most common. The first is εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*), which carries the idea of "announcing the good news."<sup>34</sup> The second is κηρύσσω (*kēryssō*), translated "proclaim, make known, preach; to proclaim an event."<sup>35</sup> The NT preachers were perceived in the same category as OT prophets. They functioned as ambassadors for God, bringing His message(s) through a speech event.

The Book of Acts contains the first Christian sermons. Upon examination, they qualify as speaking according to Pagitt. Roger Wagner observes that "fully one-fifth of the Book of Acts is taken up with sermons."<sup>36</sup> Yet when Pagitt wants to

<sup>33</sup>Church Re-Imagined 23.

<sup>34</sup>Gerhard Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζμαι," *TDNT* 2:717-21.

<sup>35</sup>Gerhard Friedrich, "κηρύσσω," *TDNT* 3:703-14. Friedrich comments, "The decisive thing is the action, the proclamation. For it accomplishes that which was expected by the OT prophets" (704).

<sup>36</sup>Roger Wagner, *Tongues Aflame: Learning to Preach from the Apostles* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishing, 2004) 33.

justify his progressional dialogue approach, he points to a conversation between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 (55-59). It is fair to say that these two men had a conversation about the gospel and its relationship to the Gentiles. But this is hardly like the rest of the sermons in the Book of Acts that are clearly speech events/speaching (e.g., Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 7:1-53; 13:15-41; 17:22-31; 22:1-21).

Yes, Acts has many dialogues, but interactive communication does not qualify as preaching. Yes, individuals proclaim much truth in Acts. But not all who simply proclaimed/spoke truth were considered preachers.

Most of Pagitt's arguments for progressional dialogue are appeals to the reasonableness of it. But his most ardent biblical defense is his understanding that the priesthood of all believers sanctions the preacherhood of all believers. He argues,

A belief in the priesthood of all believers compels us to reconsider our ideas about speaking and pastoral authority. Preaching is the act of people being led more deeply in the story of God. This was never meant to take place through the act of speech giving. Even in the rare instances in the Bible when speeches are made, they fit into the context of a community that is near constant dialogue. In fact, a great deal of the spiritual formation that happens to people in the Bible takes place outside of any sort of "church" environment. People in the Bible meet God when they are talking with unlikely messengers, when they are in the midst of crisis. The idea, then, that only a trained professional can speak about God with any kind of authority goes against everything we find in Scripture (153).

First, the priesthood of the believer has to do with the shared responsibility of all believers to evangelize (1 Pet 2:5, 9-10; Rev 1:6). Further, this great doctrine was highlighted by the Reformers to show all believers that access to God does not go through a priest, but directly through Christ (Heb 10:19-22).

Second, the idea of a "trained professional" speaking for God does not "go against everything we see in Scripture." First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 both outline the need for qualified men to give spiritual leadership and instruction to the church. First Timothy 5:17-18 even says that some of these men will be "professionals"—paid for preaching and teaching (cf. 1 Cor 9:8-14). Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to find men of spiritual maturity, gospel fidelity, and theological acumen to be the preachers and overseers of the church.

Pagitt also uses 2 Tim 2:2 as an example of progressional dialogue (157): "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." But Paul wrote this to ensure transmittance of gospel truth to successive generations. It is beyond reason that Paul said these words in reference to progressional dialogues that do not "precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation."<sup>37</sup>

It is Pagitt's contention that "We ought to understand churches as being more like prophetic communities than Christian teaching sites" (159). Yet, an overseer must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2), Timothy was to prescribe and teach things concerning the gospel (1 Tim 4:11), Timothy was to give particular attention to his teaching (1 Tim 4:13, 16), Timothy was to teach and exhort believers how to

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<sup>37</sup>*Church Re-Imagined* 166.

conduct themselves in their occupations (1 Tim 6:2), and the Word of God itself is profitable for teaching (2 Tim 3:16). There is an obvious apostolic accent on prescriptive teaching in the church.

### **Progressional Dialogue and the History of Preaching**

According to Pagitt, the problem is the sermon as a speech. In fact, speaking is a “degraded” form of ecclesiastical pedagogy and should be distinguished “from the act of preaching” itself (48). He makes the undocumented assertion that this ineffective form of preaching, which “we are stuck with” (27), “is quite new. It is the creation of Enlightenment Christianity” (28, 60).

He further suggests that

those who lived during periods of time or in places where speaking was not the normative means of preaching (basically all people before the 1700s and those living in nonindustrialized settings in our day) were not adversely affected by the lack of speakers (113).

These claims are illegitimate and unhistorical. Pagitt does not provide a single footnote or citation to substantiate these audacious ideas.

Identifying speaking as the product of the Enlightenment and absent before the 1700s is a reckless, careless, and disrespectful reconstruction of the history of preaching. What of Jesus, Paul and the apostles, Stephen, Polycarp (A.D. 68-160), Ignatius (30-110), Clement (50-100), Justin Martyr (120-190), Tertullian (170-240), Ambrose (340-397), Augustine (354-430), Chrysostom (347-407), Leo the Great (390-461), Boniface (680-655), Christopher of Alexandria (d. 863), Anselm (1033-1109), John Huss (1349-1384), Thomas a Kempis (1400-1481), John Wycliffe (1324-1384), Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Bradford (1510-1555), Hugh Latimer (1490-1555), John Rogers (1500-1555), John Knox (1505-1572), John Calvin (1509-1564), Thomas Hooker (1553-1600), Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), John Owen (1616-1683), Richard Baxter (1615-1691), and thousands more?<sup>38</sup> These “speakers” came from a variety of theological backgrounds, but all understood the definition of preaching to be the same as Pagitt’s definition of speaking—“a one-way speech” (11-12).

O. C. Edwards begins his work *A History of Preaching* with the following definition:

a *speech* [emphasis added] delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an

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<sup>38</sup>The following volumes on the history of preaching were consulted for this study. Every one understood, defined, and presumed the characteristics of preaching that Pagitt designates speaking. See Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (London: H. R. Allenson, Limited, 1887); Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954); R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876); O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Alfred Ernest Garvie, *The Christian Preacher* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920); John Ker, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888); Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903); Ralph G. Turnbull, *A History of Preaching*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974); F. R. Webber, *A History of Preaching in Britain and America*, 3 vols. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1952).

authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.<sup>39</sup>

Edwards' work encompasses a broad spectrum of homiletical theories and examples: Catholic and Protestant, conservative and liberal. Still, his conclusions park his definition of preaching on the word "speech."

Pagitt is not alone in opposing the historical form of preaching. In the 1930s Samuel Cadman, a pioneer in radio preaching, was asked, "What is the matter with the church? Where are the great preachers, such as we used to have?"

His answer was: Internally, sectarian strife; externally, the prevalent indifference and the superficial character of much of the national mind. Preaching has killed the Christian church. We go to church to hear the star in the pulpit. We have become sermon tasters instead of Christian workers. You hear a fat old grocer boast that he has sat under the pulpit of Rev. "Blowhard" for twenty years, and all the time you know he has been skinning the public. We are a sorry lot and make a poor fist at religion.<sup>40</sup>

Homiletical historian Ralph Turnbull provides this simple response to Cadman's rant: "This is not the best answer in the light of history!"<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Cadman's reputation was as a great orator (i.e., speaker).

In his multi-volume work on the history of preaching, Hughes Oliphant Old sees five genres of preaching. All are categories of what Pagitt describes as speaking.<sup>42</sup>

In *Life and Practice in the Early Church*, Steven A. McKinion records the circumstances of the first generation of preachers after the apostles. He observes that this group of preachers believed that God had spoken through the Bible, and "it was the role of the preacher to explain its meaning to them."<sup>43</sup> McKinion's book provides a sermon that is the earliest example of preaching after the NT. It was preached by an unknown preacher and circulated with Clement of Rome's *First Letter to the Corinthians*. Important for this study is the fact that it was a speech given in the classic style of exposition.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion: Same Word, Different Dictionaries

Again, preaching is public hermeneutics. David L. Bartlett writes,

A sermon is an oral interpretation of scripture, usually in the context of worship. Sermons are interpretations of scripture. Communities of faith employ and acknowledge other

<sup>39</sup>Edwards, *A History of Preaching* 3-4.

<sup>40</sup>Cited in Turnbull, *A History of Preaching* 258-59.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>42</sup>Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures* 1:8-18.

<sup>43</sup>Steven A. McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 73.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 75-79.

forms of edifying discourse, but a sermon properly understood interprets a sacred text for the life of a community and its members.<sup>45</sup>

This is the biblical and historical legacy of preaching. Those who made a difference in Christian history as preachers, orators, expositors, evangelists, reformers, teachers, missionaries, apologists ... were what Pagitt calls speakers. Ask one hundred people who have not heard of Pagitt's progressional dialogue this question, "What is preaching?" Most probably, none would describe it as a conversation in a community of faith.

*Preaching Re-Imagined* is really preaching re-defined. We are using the same word—preaching—but have different dictionaries to define it. Preaching should find its source and parameters in the pages of Holy Scripture. It should be expose the hearers to the Scripture, explain the Scripture, and exhort them to live according to the Scripture.

What and how we preach is a public confession of what we believe about the Bible and its authority. John MacArthur concludes,

Should not our preaching be biblical exposition, reflecting our conviction that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God? If we believe that "all Scripture is inspired by God" and inerrant, must we not be equally committed to the reality that it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17)? Should not that magnificent truth determine how we preach? ... The only logical response to inerrant Scripture, then, is to preach it *expositionally*.<sup>46</sup>

Preachers are to be faithful to "preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2), not dialogue about personal stories.

To read church history is to understand that the pulpit has come to us on a river of blood. Men were martyred because they refused to dialogue about the truth. Many could have saved their own lives had progressional dialogue been their conviction. But the truthfulness of Scripture anchored their souls and shook continents. The church does not need to be convinced that everyone is a preacher. The church needs more men who are faithful to the sacred desk, the public speaking of Holy Scripture.

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<sup>45</sup> David L. Bartlett, "Sermon," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lishcher (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 433.

<sup>46</sup> John MacArthur, "The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, ed. John MacArthur (Dallas: Word, 1992) 23.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS ON THE EMERGING CHURCH

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*The Emerging Church* was the subject of the 2006 *Faculty Lecture Series* in early 2006. The following bibliography contains the fruit of the lecturers' collective research plus some additional sources.

This bibliography cannot be exhaustive as there are over 18 million Web pages with some material on the movement and over two dozen new works on the subject scheduled for publication. It is simply an effort to facilitate further research and study by readers of *TMSJ*. It is divided into four sections: (1) Reference Works, (2) Monographs and Multi-Author Works, (3) Journal and Periodical Literature, and (4) Unpublished and Online Resources.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Lloyd R. Bailey. *Leviticus-Numbers*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2005. xxii + 648 pp. \$65.00 (cloth). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

Lloyd Bailey retired from his professorship in Hebrew Bible at the Divinity School, Duke University, and became a Professor of Religion at Mount Olive College and an Adjunct Professor at Methodist College. He has authored fifteen books and was one of the editors for *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Abingdon, 1976).

The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary aims at being “a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible” (xv). Much of the visual in this particular volume consists of various samples of art through the ages that reflect Leviticus and Numbers in some fashion. The accompanying CD includes a full-text PDF document of the volume that is fully searchable and allows copying of both text and illustrations for use in classroom instruction. Formatting for the volume accomplishes the visual and user-friendly aspects that present detailed information palatably.

Valuable discussions pepper the volume. One such is Bailey’s presentation of interpreting the food laws. He rightly concludes that the issue is actually “one of simple obedience to the Creator’s directives” (19). In addition, he exposes Western modernity’s focus “upon the autonomy of the self”—identifying this as “a rejection by creatures of their accountability to their Creator” (20). Yet another topic involves the repetitive nature of the sacrificial instructions in Leviticus 1–7 (57) and of the narrative in Numbers 7 (430). Such repetition “serves to drive the lesson home in a forceful and memorable way” (57). Readers will also find Bailey’s extended evaluation of various interpretive categories regarding food laws in Leviticus 11 clarifying and refreshing (129-39). This reviewer was pleasantly surprised by the author’s clear interpretive analysis of the ban on homosexuality in Lev 20:13, responding to seven erroneous popular claims about that text (245-56).

As good as some sections might be, a reader must use this volume with extreme caution. Bailey takes stances that are consistent with the Documentary Hypothesis (14-16) and antithetical to Mosaic authorship. Such an approach fragments the text of Leviticus into at least six different documents in six different time periods. One of his supports for this fragmentation of the text is the use of “the past tense and the third person” (24), as though it is unreasonable or illogical for an author to speak of himself or of an event in the past tense. Another erroneous basis for dividing the text into different productions involves the mention of cattle as a reflection of “a time when Israel had already settled in the ‘promised land,’ since

cattle will scarcely survive the rigors of nomadic life (in the Sinai Desert) at the time when the narrative is set" (46; see also 430). The biblical text, however, clearly reports that Israel took cattle into the desert (Exod 9:4-7; 10:9, 24-26; 12:32, 38).

Occasional comments denigrate the integrity of the text. For example, Bailey claims that textual differences "are to be found at tens of thousands of places" (8), without explaining whether such differences really impact meaning. Are these differences true material variants, or are they minor variations such as two different spellings for exactly the same word with the same meaning? Again, Bailey speaks of "a certain roughness of syntax" (68)—a judgment that a non-native, chronologically distant reader of Hebrew cannot make with any degree of certainty. When he writes that "the New Testament writers used (or misused) Leviticus" (96), he questions the integrity and accuracy of the NT. He proposes that final compilers of the text "were not bothered by . . . conflicting details, . . . apparently because the specifics did not matter" (111). It appears that Bailey has a low view of inspiration and inerrancy. Such examples of theological antipathy to divine authorship conflict with his declaration that "God has defined holiness" (203). Other than Walter Kaiser on Leviticus (in *The New Interpreter's Bible* [Abingdon, 1994]) and Gordon Wenham on Numbers (Old Testament Guides [Sheffield, 1979] and Tyndale OT Commentaries [Inter-Varsity, 1981]), commentaries from an evangelical perspective are notably absent in the bibliography (615-22).

Bailey employs the human analogy of a family gathering a genealogical history in an attempt to explain the gradual development of the text (17). Such analogies, however, do injustice to the divinely superintended inscripturation of the Word of God (a concept whose presence is noticeably missing in this volume, unless one might read something into his sidebar comment about "the spirit of the LORD" coming upon the literary prophets, 114). In the same vein, even though Bailey criticizes one author for basing an interpretation "upon modern anthropological models, a rather precarious methodology" (121 n. 5; cf. also his criticism of "a 'hermeneutic of suspicion,'" 183), he himself uses such models for explaining the concept of God's "glory" (109-10), the practice of corner tassels with blue thread (153 n. 35), and the belief in demons (168; over and over again Bailey denies the existence of demons, even at the expense of the NT record, 33-34, 126, 185).

In the sidebars, Bailey occasionally fails to clarify information for the reader or to discuss obvious associations. In the discussion of the Dead Sea scroll notation 4QSam<sup>b</sup>, the author provides no explanation for the meaning of <sup>b</sup> (10). Treatment of the topic of demons lurking on thresholds and divine guardians (72) provoke questions regarding the cherub decorations in Tabernacle and Temple as well as the presence of cherubim to guard the entrance into the Garden of Eden. However, Bailey does not address any of those associations. Within the text itself the reader is left wondering how being "cut off" would be accomplished, if it consists of "termination of the offender's genealogical line" (88). Was Israel to execute all of a violator's children, or did they castrate him?

Unfortunately, Bailey reveals a lack of accurate knowledge about the church in both Russia and China by claiming that, unlike persecuted Judaism, the persecuted church is "driven to the verge of extinction" (147). It is but one example, however, of providing undependable information.

Rekha M. Chennattu. *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006. xxiv + 256. \$29.95 (paper). Reviewed by Paul R. Thorsell, Associate Professor of Theology at The Master's College.

Rekha Chennattu's *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* illustrates just how far contemporary Johannine scholarship has turned from Rudolf Bultmann's Gnostic interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, which dominated so much of the twentieth century. Despite John's omission of the Synoptic and Pauline words of Jesus inaugurating the new covenant, Chennattu paints the portrait of Johannine discipleship with the vivid colors of covenantal language and motifs drawn from the OT and second temple Judaism. Chennattu's volume, originally written as a dissertation under Francis Moloney at the Catholic University of America, is a masterful defense of the thesis that Johannine discipleship must be read as Christian faithfulness to the new covenant relationship created by Jesus.

Chapter one begins with a survey of the scope of recent scholarship on Johannine discipleship from Moreno to Köstenberger before focusing on discipleship motifs in the three call-stories of John 1:35-51. Chennattu detects elements within these stories related to OT covenantal motifs. The invitation to "abide," knowledge of Jesus, the call to witness, and the acts of renaming and promising are all viewed against an OT covenantal background.

In chapters two and three, Chennattu examines significant motifs within the OT depiction of covenant (election, divine presence, knowledge of God, witness, peace, promises) before proceeding to read John 13-17 (1-12 is examined cursorily) against these motifs. She concludes that the farewell meal (John 13) is depicted as an OT covenant meal; the injunction to love functions as the new covenant commandment. John 14 expounds the presence and knowledge of Jesus/the Father through the Paraclete. "Abiding" in Jesus (15) is the equivalent of the OT demand for covenantal faithfulness. Jesus' prayer (17) operates as the equivalent of a covenantal inauguration ritual. Chennattu instructively concludes, "The evangelist takes the OT covenant metaphor, redefines and broadens its prospect, and applies it to the relationship between God and the new covenant community of Jesus' disciples" (139). Chennattu's exposition of John 20-21 in chapter four provides an argument comparable to the previous chapters. Jesus' actions reconstitute and empower the new-covenant community of His disciples. For instance, as Moses returned from the mountain with the tables of the Law, Jesus returns to His disciples with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter five is tangential to her argument, and probably the most problematic. Chennattu suggests that the Fourth Gospel reflects the *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine community responding to its exclusion from post-destruction Judaism. In the aftermath of A.D. 70, according to Chennattu, Judaism utilizes the covenant metaphor to restore its self-identity (194) and excludes the Johannine community as covenant breakers. In reply, the community presents Christianity as the establishment of the new covenant relationship with God (as reflected by the Fourth Gospel). Chennattu's scenario is plausible and certainly consistent with prevailing notions (following E. P. Sanders, et. al.) that first-century Judaism was a covenantal nomism. But the evidence she presents is hardly persuasive. The

Qumran literature and Pseudo-Philo certainly cannot substantiate her thesis since they antedate the destruction. Fourth Ezra (as Sanders argued) is not representative of second temple Judaism and 2 Baruch's close relationship to or dependence on 4 Ezra vitiates it as an independent witness. In the end, Chennattu fails to substantiate her hypothesis about the Johannine community.

The volume has a few oddities that editing could have remedied. In the tables on pages 42-43 and 150-51, some items have English only, some contain only the Greek text, some include English translation with the Greek text; consistency would have been helpful. W. R. G. Loader's article on Johannine "Christology" is mistitled in the footnotes and bibliography. In my opinion, the chapter divisions are not helpful. Yet *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* is well worth the read. The observations and comparisons by which the author argues her thesis separately are interesting but unpersuasive. Cumulatively, however, they constitute a compelling argument that John (like Paul, Hebrews, and the Synoptic Gospels) presents Jesus as the inaugurator of the new covenant and Christians as those called to new covenant faithfulness.

Roland Chia. *Hope for the World: A Christian Vision of the Last Things*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005. 164 pp. \$14.00 (paper). Reviewed by Michael J. Vlach, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Roland Chia's book, *Hope for the World*, is one in a series entitled Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective, in which non-Western writers discuss Christian doctrine with an international audience in mind. Chia is dean of the school of postgraduate studies and director of the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry at Trinity Theological College, Singapore.

*Hope for the World* is about the nature of Christian hope (11) and was written primarily for pastors and lay leaders. It is an introduction or guide to eschatology that examines the major doctrines and issues related to last things. Chapter 1, "Hope in Asia," focuses on the spiritual and cultural situation in Asia. Chapters 2-7 discuss various topics related to eschatology such as the kingdom of God, the day of the Lord, the coming of Christ, and the eternal state. Chapter 8, "Living in Hope," discusses how a biblical eschatology should apply to people today.

Chia writes from an evangelical amillennial perspective and thus affirms the major tenets of orthodox eschatology such as the personal visible return of Christ, the restoration of the creation, and non-ending punishment for the wicked. On issues like the kingdom of God, the timing of the millennium, and the relationship between Israel and the church, most non-amillennialists are certain to find points of disagreement.

The book has helpful aspects. First, Chia's methodology is to be commended and even modeled. He not only expounds the basics of Christian orthodoxy, he also contrasts the truth of the Christian view with erroneous beliefs, in this case the views of the Asian religions including Buddhism and Hinduism. For instance, he shows how the Eastern concept of suffering (*dukkha*) as an illusion is refuted by the

Christian view that suffering is real and will someday be completely defeated as a result of the cross of Christ.

Second, Chia offers a helpful and needed discussion about the hope of the Christian. Too often the Christian hope is presented as an ethereal, immaterial heaven that resembles the non-material afterlife of the ancient Greek philosophers. This approach, though, does not do justice to the holistic restoration discussed in Scripture. According to Chia, though a disembodied state of existence exists for all who physically die before the return of Christ, each person will receive a resurrected body suitable for the eternal dwelling place. For the Christian this dwelling place is a restored creation. Chia also rightly shows that a personal God is the object of and basis for this hope. Such contrasts sharply with the impersonal Brahman of Hinduism and the nirvana (extinction) concept of Buddhism.

Third, and perhaps most helpful, is Chia's presentation of a Christian theodicy. Avoiding much of the philosophical jargon usually associated with discussions about the problem of evil, Chia correctly asserts that the answer to the problem of evil in the world cannot be solved philosophically. Instead, it must be answered theologically and eschatologically. The issue can be resolved only in light of what God has done in Christ and what God will bring about in the fullness of time (143). Thus, attempts to answer the problem of evil from a non-Christological standpoint are doomed to frustration.

The book has disappointing aspects, however. In agreeing with the big picture analysis that Chia offers in regard to the Christian's hope, this reviewer disagrees with several of his amillennial interpretations, particularly his views concerning the millennium and his supersessionist approach to Israel and the church.

For instance, Chia states that "premillennialism actually contradicts the NT, which makes no mention of a 'third age' in which Christ will reign upon the earth" (122). In contrast, premillennialists are correct in affirming that *both* the Old and New Testaments teach a "third age" that is different from the present age and the future eternal state. Zechariah 14 speaks of a time when "the LORD will be king over all the earth" (v. 9) but sin and punishment will still exist (vv. 16-20). Thus, Zechariah appears to describe a "third age" that is different from the present age and different from the future sinless eternal state. Also, Revelation 19-21 sets out a chronology that explicitly teaches a "third age." After the present age, Christ returns to reign for a thousand years and then the eternal state with the new heavens and earth begin. Thus, one can be confident that both the Old and New Testaments affirm a third age in which Christ reigns upon the earth.

Chia also assumes a supersessionist view of Israel and the church that is not convincing. For him, the church is the new Israel and all nationalistic promises to God are fulfilled in the church. His conclusion, however, falters in light of the fact that no NT passage identifies the church as Israel, nor is there any text that says that the church *alone* has become the possessor of Israel's promises and covenants.

Chia's conclusions on these matters stem from the amillennial position that the NT interprets the OT (124). However, though this reviewer acknowledges that the NT is a more complete revelation that at times interprets (but not reinterprets) the OT, he cannot simply dismiss the many detailed promises concerning Israel's restoration found in the OT. Not only does the NT not revoke those promises, it reaffirms the OT expectations for the nation Israel (see Matt 19:28; 23:37-39; Luke

21:24; Acts 1:6-7; and Rom 11:25-29).

Also disappointing was Chia's singling out of dispensationalism for criticism. One does not expect an amillennial scholar to speak favorably of dispensationalism, especially in a book on eschatology. But unlike other works of recent years that have expressed a more irenic spirit toward dispensationalism and dispensationalists, Chia takes a less gracious approach. After claiming that dispensationalism "tries to fit the biblical data into the procrustean bed it has created" (129), he uses a quote from Bruce Milne to assert that one may have to wonder about the "effect" dispensationalism may have on "personal religion and personal attitudes" (129). Thus, Chia seems to claim that dispensationalism may lead to defects in one's personal walk with God—a claim that this reviewer finds unnecessary and hard to defend.

In sum, this reviewer has mixed opinions about this book. It certainly has good information. However, the amillennial approach to eschatology and negative portrayal of dispensationalism disqualify it from being a must-have reference for students of Christian doctrine or eschatology.

Dale Ralph Davis. *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury*. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005. 344 pp. \$15.99 (paper). Reviewed by Keith Essex, Assistant Professor of Bible Exposition.

In 1988, Baker Book House published *No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua* by Dale Ralph Davis as the introductory volume in the series Expositor's Guide to the [OT] Historical Books. The stated purpose of Davis, a Presbyterian pastor and former OT professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, was "to provide a model of what a pastor can do in biblical study if he will sweat over the Hebrew text and assume the text as we have it was meant to be bread from God for his people" (7). Davis fulfilled this purpose superbly in his volume on Joshua. Volumes on Judges (1990) and 1 Samuel (1994) by Davis followed under the Baker imprint. However, after the publication of one more volume on Ruth and Esther by other authors (1995), Baker discontinued the series. Fortunately for biblical expositors, Christian Focus republished the three volumes by Davis discontinued by Baker and have allowed him to complete the three additional volumes on 2 Samuel (1999), 1 Kings (2002), and now 2 Kings (2005). Appreciative readers echo the words of the author of this work on 2 Kings, "I am especially thankful to the kind folks at Christian Focus, who picked up an 'orphaned series' halfway through" (9).

Readers of the previous five volumes by Davis will not be disappointed as they read *2 Kings*. All of the strengths of the preceding expositions reappear in this work. First and foremost, the author concentrates on explaining and applying the biblical text; significant manuscript, lexical, syntactical, historical, and geographical issues are dealt with in footnotes. The footnotes themselves cite good sources and expose the reader to the richness of traditional and contemporary scholarship on 2 Kings. The main text reproduces the exposition to be communicated to the audience. The exposition consistently blends sound exegesis, theological substance, and sound

application. Second, the writer anchors the expositional outline to the structure of the biblical text and clearly demonstrates the connection to his readers. Third, the biblical text is explained with vividness and crispness. Fourth, the theological principles observed in a text are precisely articulated. Fifth, apt illustrations from church history, military history, and the writer's own experiences in particular are sprinkled throughout the expositions. Sixth, the author's wit surfaces continually in the writing. For example, one chapter is entitled "The Peril of Church Suppers" (71) and another "When God Gave a Preacher the Axe" (101).

Davis is also a master of variety. There is no dull monotony in the thirty expositions found in this work. The outlining at times is descriptive and at other times interpretive. There is also variety in the use of third person and second person in the outlines. Some chapters begin with a lengthy introduction before the exposition, while others delve right into an exposition of the text. In each chapter, Davis is concerned to communicate what the text of 2 Kings is revealing about the character of God and the necessary response of His people. Many times there will be an explicit or implicit connection between the OT text and the NT revelation concerning Jesus, but some of the expositions are content to remain in the OT and give a Yahweh-centered application to the readers.

Today, there is a renewed emphasis on the preaching of OT narrative in evangelical circles (see the review of Steven D. Mathewson's *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* below). The six volumes of Ralph Dale Davis, of which *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury* is the culmination, are excellent guides for the contemporary expositor as he preaches from the "Former Prophets." Davis has laid an excellent foundation; may many biblical expositors build upon his work as they preach OT narrative.

John H. Dobson. *Learn Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. xiv + 391 pp. \$29.99 (cloth). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

In recent years a number of biblical Hebrew grammars have appeared on the market, each attempting to outdo the other grammars in either being user friendly or in being more scholarly in approach. This grammar's claim is that students learn to read verses in the Hebrew text after just two hours of instruction and longer passages after eight hours (i). Like Page H. Kelley (*Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar*; Eerdmans, 1992), Dobson has a missions background and experience in a language other than English. He was trained as a classical scholar at Merton, Oxford, and spent time in Uganda in the Lugbara language (ix). His grammar is the product of ten years of teaching in Africa and Europe. He died early in 2006. Employing tried methods for spoken language acquisition, Dobson produces a methodology featuring memory techniques like miming and movement (24), usage (49), sounds (72), visualization (88), interaction (127), and singing (16, 33, 118). An audio CD accompanies the volume to give the student the sounds of the Hebrew for the exercises. Its recordings are clear and definitely helpful. However, since Dobson does not break the accompanying texts into identical segments, students might have

difficulty coordinating the reading segments with the text segments.

Introductions to each section of the grammar provide a clear view of lesson content and goals (1, 35-39). Vocabulary lists utilize three dots (. . .) to indicate a wider range of meanings than those he provides (15). At times, however, Dobson fails to indicate such a range for words like the *beth* preposition (29; cp. 135, 302-6). From the start he rightly informs the student that the *waw* conjunction has a variety of uses and translations (27). He also introduces the student to *wayyiqtol* early as the verb that marks the next step forward in normal Hebrew narrative (36).

One of the strengths of this grammar is the focus on narrative and its characteristics. Insightfully, Dobson employs “main line” and “off line” to identify the distinction between two types of narrative verbs (38; also discussed by Duane A. Garrett, *A Modern Grammar for Classical Hebrew* [Broadman & Holman, 2002] 318-19). Throughout the grammar he preserves a focus on context as the ultimate determining factor for translation and meaning (39, 67, 75). Listing helpful translation guidelines (56), he gives the student clear direction for translating biblical Hebrew.

Dobson does not ignore the intricacies and difficulties inherent in biblical Hebrew. To introduce students to the potential ambiguity of the Hebrew text, he presents a brief discussion of Gen 2:18 (145). In addition, he informs them that emphasis is not always a simple matter of word order (248). His summaries of sections on wishes, oaths, conditions, and *wayyiqtol* are simple and memorable (223, 239). He leaves the treatment of Hebrew poetry to the end (279-94). It is not as thorough as his treatment of narrative, but is quite understandable and practical.

In spite of the many helpful and insightful features of Dobson’s grammar, it has many unfortunate errors and inaccuracies that might confuse or hinder the student. Christ’s cry in Matthew 27:46 does employ the Hebrew *Ēli* (“my God”), but the full statement is Aramaic, not Hebrew (1). Describing the pronunciation of *ayin* as “a slightly raspy sound in the back of the throat, like the start of a gargle” (9) is too close to the guttural *heth* and ignores the fact that it is often silent. “אֵת or אֶת may also be used before a name. In the examples note אֵל ‘not’, אֶל ‘and not’: . . .” (19) is a confusing non sequitur. By translating the Tetragrammaton (יהוה) as “Lord” instead of “LORD” or “Yahweh” or “YHWH” (28, 45), Dobson leads students to ignore the significant difference between the divine titles *Adonai* and *Yahweh*. His treatment of the Hebrew perfect as “completed” action (37, 96), rather than complete (or, whole), runs contrary to the latest grammatical opinions (cf. Gary A. Long, *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew: Learning Biblical Hebrew Grammatical Concepts through English Grammar* [Hendrickson, 2002] 92 and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Eisenbrauns, 1990] §30.1d). Dobson’s discussion of the correlative perfect (94-95) is basically the old-fashioned *waw*-conversive view, which ignores the role of context and genre.

On the basis of the statement that Hebrew writers “do not use long complicated sentences with many subordinate clauses” (97), students might think that subordinate clauses are rare in biblical Hebrew and fail to comprehend the complex of subordinate clauses in Ruth 1:1. Discussion of the weak verb forms (103-7) lacks adequate organization, preventing the student from understanding them more readily. Dobson misrepresents the Piel conjugation as primarily “a strong form

of action” (107) and omits the iterative (or, repetitive) from his summary list of usages (159). He ignores the immediate future (*futurum instans*) usage of the Hebrew participle (152, 244). Students and teachers alike will be puzzled by the absence of any discussion of vowel lengthening (349-50 refer to only to vowel shortening and reduction).

Lastly, the dictionary exercise (160-62) requires Langenscheidt’s Hebrew dictionary. Dobson fails to introduce the student to an inadequate lexicon for biblical Hebrew. His exercise would have been for more effective with William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1988).

Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, Justin Taylor, eds. *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004. 365 pp. \$20.00 (paper). Reviewed by Robert L. Thomas, Professor of New Testament.

According to Justin Taylor, who writes “An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book,” advocates of a postconservative evangelical theology have surfaced under various names: postconservatives, reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists, postfoundationalists, postpropositionalists, and postevangelicals (17-18). Such people are self-professed evangelicals whose purpose is to revise the theology, renew the center, and transform the worshiping community of evangelicalism because of the postmodern global context of the present day (18). Taylor suggests Stanley Grenz as postconservatism’s Professor, Brian McLaren as its Pastor, and Roger Olson and Robert Webber as its Publicists (18).

The book’s contributors include Chad Owen Brand, A. B. Caneday, D. A. Carson, Garrett DeWeese, Kwabena Donkor, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, Douglas R. Groothuis, J. P. Moreland, James Parker III, R. Scott Smith, Justin Taylor, William G. Travis, and Stephen J. Wellum. This group defends foundationalism-type teaching of Christian doctrine against the postconservatives who advocate more of a community-determined use of Scripture in the present postmodern culture. The postconservatives contend that the Carl Henry-type doctrinal position is out of date in the today’s world. They prefer a “generous orthodoxy” that is somewhere between conservative traditionalism and liberal-progressivism.

In his chapter, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Postconservatism’s Use of Language Games,” Caneday notes that a favorite device of Grenz and his fellow postconservative John R. Franke goes by the name of speech-act theory. They see the primary purpose of Scripture as functional as the Spirit speaks to the church in a postmodern, postfoundationalist context. They criticize the Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge for viewing the doctrine of Scripture as foundational to all Christian theology. They point to the Spirit’s subjective speech-acts as He uses Scripture within the community of believers. “Their appropriation of speech-act theory, then, is to move beyond what the Scripture says and means (textually accessible) to God’s acts and speech today

(textually inaccessible)” (155). For them, many and varied applications of the text replace the time-honored hermeneutical principle that the text has one and only one meaning. That use of speech-act theory opens wide the door to using the text to support various mutually exclusive meanings, a great concession to postmodernism.

Erickson in his chapter, “On Flying in Theological Fog,” critiques postconservatism’s effort to adjust to a postmodern culture. He writes, “One of the criticisms of postconservative evangelicalism in this volume is that it is too focused on the present, or in some cases, on the past, which it thinks to be the present. It also sometimes looks at the present and describes it as the future.” His point is that trying to adjust Christian theology to a changing secular culture is a hopeless task because no one knows what direction that culture will take in the future.

As seen by Taylor, postconservatives have acknowledged their own set of debilitating dichotomies: “focus on the center versus preoccupation with boundaries; convertive piety versus correct doctrine; appropriation of postmodernism versus stagnant traditionalism” (32).

This reviewer certainly agrees with the tone of the essays in this book. Postconservatism is a current danger to evangelicalism. The essays are a timely warning to all evangelicals. Yet he is disappointed at the dominant philosophical treatment of the dangers that contributors have authored. A scanty one and one-half page “Scripture Index” at the end of a book of this length reflects how rarely contributors have referred to the Bible in support of this warning. Those desiring a more biblical response to postconservatism must look elsewhere to find it.

Daniel J. Estes. *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. 448 pp. \$34.99 (cloth). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

Robert Chisholm’s *Handbook on the Prophets* (2002; see *TMSJ* 16/2 [2005]:328-32) and Victor P. Hamilton’s two titles, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2d ed. (2005) and *Handbook on the Historical Books* (2001) are companion volumes to *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* in Baker Academic’s handbook series. Estes intends the book for “advanced undergraduates, seminary students, pastors, and lay teachers of the Bible” (9). This reviewer required *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* for courses on OT wisdom literature that he taught to seminary students in Myanmar and Singapore and will continue to use it for all such courses in the foreseeable future. For students with limited resources and limited means to obtain books of value, this volume provides excellent verse by verse expositions of Job (11-139), Ecclesiastes (271-392), and Song of Songs (393-444).

Coverage of the Book of Proverbs (213-69) is thematic (twelve themes arranged alphabetically: cheerfulness [224-27], contentment [227-32], decisions [232-35], diligence [235-36], friendship [236-39], generosity [239-43], humility [243-45], kindness [245-48], parenting [248-52], purity [252-54], righteousness [254-57], and truthfulness [257-61]). The author selected these twelve themes as representative of “procedures and virtues that are constituent parts of a life characterized by wisdom” (224). Selected psalms with wisdom content (arranged

according to ten psalm types) comprise the treatment of Psalms: introduction (Psalm 1; 152-55), descriptive praise (Psalm 145; 155-58), nature (Psalm 29; 159-62), declarative praise (Psalm 138; 162-65), lament (Psalm 13; 165-72), imprecation (Psalm 109; 172-77), messianic prophecy (Psalm 22; 178-85), enthronement (Psalm 98; 185-90), wisdom (Psalm 127; 190-96), and trust (Psalm 46; 196-99).

A fairly detailed introduction discusses such matters as authorship, date, unity, literature, structure, setting, purpose, theme, poetry, interpretation, and theology for each biblical book. For the Book of Job, Estes provides excellent argumentation for establishing the setting in patriarchal times (22-23).

Within the expositions, the author consistently refers to the Hebrew text for the discussion of key words and for the solving of interpretive problems and is not reluctant to tackle even textual critical issues (cf. 66-67 with reference to Job 13:15). Ecclesiastes receives the greatest amount of attention and detail. In fact, Estes' excellent commentary on that book could stand alone. The exposition of Eccl 3:11 provides one of the volume's most memorable and repeatable lines: "In other words, humans are bound by time, but they are wired for eternity" (313).

Although Estes' volume is thoroughly evangelical, an occasional dubious statement occurs. For example, he refers to the parables of Jesus as "literary fictions" (18; see also, 325). He also lends too much credence to mythology and legend supposedly employed in Job. If *Behemoth* and *Leviathan* truly reveal God's omniscience and omnipotence, they must be real rather than "fantastic or legendary creatures" (121; see Job 40:15). In Eccl 1:16 he resorts to claiming that the writer of the book probably made "a slip" (297), rather than supporting the inerrancy of the text. Estes does not hold to Solomonic authorship, describing Qoheleth's "masquerade as Solomon" (304) and his construction of "a royal fiction" (286).

This volume utilizes the NIV as the textual base for exposition. In the bibliographies Estes does not list secondary literature (articles, essays, and monographs) of note prior to 1992, since recent commentaries cite the earlier items (10). Readers will find the bibliographies very helpful in the pursuit of significant resources. The brief topic index at the conclusion of the volume (445-48) is not extensive enough to make a valuable contribution—a Scripture index would have been far more useful.

Yizhar Hirschfeld. *Qumran in Context: Reassessing the Archaeological Evidence*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004. xxvi + 270 pp. \$34.95 (cloth). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

Yizhar Hirschfeld, Professor of Classical Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Institute of Archaeology and author of *The Judean Desert Mountains in the Byzantine Period* (Yale, 1992) and *The Palestinian Dwelling in the Roman-Byzantine Period* (Franciscan Press, 1995), currently directs excavations at En Gedi, Ramat Hanadiv, and Tiberias. All of these projects focus on the Roman and Byzantine periods, the eras of his expertise. Joining a chorus of archaeologists questioning the traditional findings of Roland de Vaux at Qumran (cf. de Vaux's *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* [Oxford University, 1973]), Hirschfeld

proposes that the site was the prosperous rural estate of an influential member of Israelite metropolitan society. Although he is not the first to make such an identification, his major contribution to the debate relates to his employment of results from a regional survey of sites in order to place Qumran within its regional as well as chronological context.

Firstly, Hirschfeld discusses "The Study of Qumran" (1-27), describing the nature, setting, and significance of the find as well as a brief history of the archaeological field work and recent scholarly work. Secondly, he introduces the reader to the debate of the scrolls' origins (29-48): Qumran or Jerusalem? He concludes that the heterogeneity of the scrolls is more characteristic of a setting in second temple Jerusalem than a sectarian community in Qumran (48).

"The Archaeology of Qumran" (49-182) comprises the third chapter and the volume's core content. Excavations by de Vaux, though typical of his time, were inferior to today's conventions and standards (52-53). Archaeological evidence depicts the Late Iron Age settlement at Qumran as a general settlement that might have functioned as a military post starting in the late seventh century B.C. (59). It is most likely that John Hyrcanus I (134-104 B.C.) in the Hasmonean period reconstructed Qumran as a field fort and road-station (87). In the Herodian period (ca. 37 B.C.-A.D. 68) the site became a civilian rural estate (88) with a striking similarity to George Washington's estate at Mt. Vernon in Virginia (90). De Vaux's "scriptorium" might turn out to be a private dining room (93-96). Unfortunately, de Vaux appears to have ignored the lamps, juglets, lathe-turned stoneware, and glass vessels that help to demonstrate the economic wealth of Herodian Qumran (142). Architectural details, geometric tiles, stucco, columns, evidence of arches, and flagstone also indicate a wealthy settlement rather than a monastic sectarian settlement (142). A "far cry from Pliny's description of the Essenes as living 'without money'" (143; see also, 230), large quantities of coins at Qumran contradict the sectarian hypothesis.

Fourthly, after examining the available evidence at nearby 'Ein Feshka (183-209), Hirschfeld proposes that the site played a role in the perfume industry (207). De Vaux, on the other hand, had concluded that 'Ein Feshka housed a tannery that produced the parchment for Qumran's scrolls (203). Lastly, the author leads a tour of the Dead Sea Valley in the second temple period (211-43). In geographical and historical context, Qumran fits the classification of fortified estates or manor houses (221, 229). Expelling the Essenes from Qumran, however, does not invalidate Pliny's identification of an Essene site near the Dead Sea. In fact, Hirschfeld has excavated a potential Essene sectarian site situated above En-Gedi (233).

For the most recent archaeological study offering support to de Vaux's viewpoint, this reviewer (and Hirschfeld) would refer the reader to Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eerdmans, 2002). The newest contribution to the ongoing debate comes from Yizhak Magen and Yuval Peleg who believe that Qumran was nothing more than a pottery factory ("Back to Qumran: Ten Years of Excavation and Research, 1993-2004," in *The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates*, eds. Katharina Galor et al., 55-113, *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah* 57 [Brill, 2006]).

Compellingly written, richly illustrated (73 black and white plates, 16 color plates, and 47 drawings, plans, and maps), and systematically presented, Hirschfeld's

*Qumran in Context* is must reading for anyone interested in the manuscript and/or archaeological finds at Qumran. Academic libraries should acquire this volume for their collections on the topic of the Dead Sea scrolls.

R. Kent Hughes. *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004. 702 pp. \$34.99 (cloth). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

*Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* presents readers with a pleasantly readable expository commentary on the Book of Genesis. As the senior pastor of The College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and a popular Bible conference speaker, Kent Hughes is a skillful biblical expositor. Comparing this volume with two sources Hughes frequently cites helps to classify this commentary. On the one hand, the two volumes by Kenneth A. Mathews in the New American Commentary series (*Genesis 1–11:26* and *Genesis 12–50*; Broadman & Holman, 1996, 2002; see review in *TMSJ* 8/2 [Fall 1997]:244-47) are more exegetical in nature. On the other hand, *Creation and Blessing* by Allen P. Ross (Baker, 1998; see review in *TMSJ* 11/2 [Fall 2000]:269-70), instructs preachers how to expound the text of Genesis. Hughes' commentary is a great example of building upon the foundation Ross laid.

Endnotes (625-70) provide readers with pertinent quotations from a wide range of key resources for interpreting Genesis. Five excurses (perhaps representing individual topical sermons) summarize key theological topics: "Man and Sin in Genesis" (579-87), "Faith and Righteousness in Genesis" (589-97), "Grace in Genesis" (599-606), "Messiah in Genesis" (607-14), and "God in Genesis" (615-24). Indexes (Scripture, 671-85; General, 686-97; and Sermon Illustrations, 698-702) round out the volume of seventy-five sermons—approximately one and a half years of Sundays.

Hughes' expositions deal forthrightly with the text of Genesis. He chooses his illustrations with care and employs them to heighten the focus of the text itself. Applications are judicious, contextual, and often tied to equivalent NT truths. Expositions through Genesis 12–50 provide rich character studies of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah. One of the most memorable of his expositions, "Guilt and Grace" (493-99; regarding Gen 42:1-38), hammers home the truth that "True guilt is a grace because it brings the guilty to seek forgiveness and to repent" (496). Hughes' presentation of Judah's transition to a godly leader superbly balances Judah's spiritual development and Messianic prophecy about his ultimate descendant (451-57 and 549-54).

Normally, sermons dealing with the theological intricacies related to the fall of mankind propel the expositor headlong into matters many in the pew find difficult to understand. Hughes, however, succeeds in simplifying without sacrificing theological depth (57-99). His success is partly due to dividing Genesis 3 carefully into four sermons, enabling him to serve the information in digestible bites without losing continuity.

The series of nineteen sermons on Abraham (181-329) is especially masterful and provides passionate, sound expositions based on accurate exegesis.

However, the series of eighteen sermons on Joseph (435-577), though superbly presented, are uneven in their exegetical accuracy. To his credit, Hughes correctly reminds the reader that Joseph's coat was most likely "a sleeved coat that reached to the wrists and ankles" (438), rather than a multi-colored garment. On the other side of the exegetical ledger, however, dating Joseph's imprisonment to 1500 B.C. (465) is inaccurate. It is possible that the date might be a typo rather than an intentional late-dating since Hughes gives 1720-1570 B.C. as the dates for the Hyksos rulers (460).

At some points factuality appears to suffer from a lack of accurate information. For example, domesticated camels were not a "rarity" (193) in the time of Abraham (see John J. Davis, "The Camel in Biblical Narratives," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Ronald F. Youngblood, 1412-52 [Moody, 1986]). Likewise, it is inconsistent with biblical usage to claim that "the superior always blesses the inferior" (219)—see 14:19-20, where Melchizedek employs the same word for the blessing of Abraham and God in the same statement (cp. Pss 16:7 and 72:15, too often translated "praise"; cf. Michael L. Brown, *NIDOTTE*, 1:764 [#9]). Whether Hughes adopts a late date for the exodus from Egypt is difficult to ascertain. He identifies Goshen with "the land of Rameses" (520) and his endnote cites Kidner favorably regarding a Ramesside context for Moses (666), and at 47:11 he ignores the problem the text presents regarding the early date (533).

In a few places Hughes implies that some textual details in the pre-patriarchal period are nothing more than Moses' own inserted ideas or concepts. For example, he declares that "The designation 'in Eden, in the east' is from the perspective of Moses, in the Sinai" (53). In addition, with a touch of anachronistic reasoning, he proposes that Moses' account of the building of the tower of Babel is colored by a Palestinian perspective (170).

This reviewer's greatest disagreements with Hughes reside in his exposition of 1:1–2:17 (15-56). Reference to "the primeval chaos" (21) at the earth's creation unnecessarily assumes a chaotic rather than orderly condition of the earth in 1:2. A chaos viewpoint leads to the depiction of the darkness as evil (cp. 30, "Christ the Creator, who brings order out of the dark chaos of our lives"), rather than as God's good creation. Interestingly (amusingly?) disagreement over the length of the "days" of creation evokes an appeal "to employ good will and magnanimity" (24), but later Hughes implies that some interpreters exhibit "ignorant arrogance" (26) in their attempts to deal with this problem. Arguing that the seventh day had no end (26, 43, 45, 46) seems to go beyond the natural reading of the text and produces a conflict with the clear implications of the Fourth Commandment in Exod 20:10-11. Forcing this unending day interpretation on the preceding six days (27) seems equally precarious and unnatural.

At other times Hughes takes a certain degree of artistic license—such as his description of Abraham's and the heavenly guests' faces as "leathered" (262). Who among us, however, has not waxed eloquently in the same fashion without supporting evidence? Occasional lapses in archeological, cultural, or historical details might briefly distract those who know better, but no one can read these expositions without God impacting heart and mind with His Word. Every preacher of Genesis should read this volume.

Steven D. Mathewson. *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002. 279 pp. \$19.99 (paper). Reviewed by Keith Essex, Assistant Professor of Bible Exposition.

“I write as an evangelical pastor to other evangelical pastors who have the amazing privilege and awesome responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God to their congregations week after week. You are my heroes” (15). So begins Steven Mathewson, the senior pastor of Dry Creek Bible Church, Belgrade, Montana, as he introduces this book, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. Mathewson recounts his own frustrations as he began to preach through 1 & 2 Samuel in his second year of pastoral ministry:

I had preached a sermon chock-full of exegetical insights and laced with historical-cultural data. I even pressed it into a neat analytical outline. But my sermon did not do justice to the purpose of Old Testament stories: to lure people into real-life dramas where they run smack into God’s agenda and his assessment of their lives (13).

His frustration led him to raise the level of his own OT narrative sermons. His passion was to devour every book and article on interpreting and preaching OT narratives and become a preaching practitioner of what he was learning. He has preached through nine of the historical books of the English Bible and has also prepared sermons from individual texts in every other narrative book of the OT. A large part of his D.Min. studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary was devoted to preaching OT narrative literature. In 1997, Mathewson published a summary of his findings in the article, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives” (*Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 [October-December 1997]:410-35). Though he admits that he still has much to learn, Mathewson writes, “But I reached a point in my journey where I feel compelled to help other preachers who struggle with the proclamation of Old Testament narrative texts. I am attempting to write the book I needed when I first started” (14).

Mathewson begins the volume with an introductory chapter, “The Challenge of Preaching OT Narratives” (19-27). He notes that in a culture where people are programmed to think in stories, preachers need to take the narratives of the OT seriously. “As evangelicals, we’ve taken Old Testament stories seriously enough to defend their historicity. Now it’s time to learn to preach them effectively” (20). He avers that preachers who are committed to expository preaching, i.e., preaching that exposes the meaning of Scripture and applies that meaning to the lives of the hearers, need to realize that good storytellers do not convey their stories through analytical outlines. Yet the analytical outline is the approach usually used by contemporary evangelical expositors. Mathewson proposes in this volume to remodel a method of preaching OT narratives built on the stages of sermon preparation presented in Haddon Robinson’s textbook, *Biblical Preaching* (2d ed., Baker, 2001).

The author divides the core of his book into three parts. Part 1 is entitled

“From Text to Concept” (29-90), and it concentrates on the hermeneutical task of interpreting the OT narrative texts. Part 2, “From Concept to Sermon” (91-157), deals with the homiletical task of how to craft an accurate, clear, interesting, and relevant sermon from an OT narrative text. Part 3, “Sermon Manuscripts” (159-226), provides five examples of sermons based on OT narrative texts to show how to apply the concepts described in the first two parts of the book. Two appendices follow the main discussion. Appendix A details how to analyze narrative plot structure from the OT Hebrew text (227-55). Appendix B supplies resources for the study of the OT narrative books, Genesis through Esther (256-60). A bibliography (261-70), Scripture index (271-74), and subject index (275-79) complete the volume.

The most valuable section of the book is Part 1 where Mathewson displays pedagogical skill in summarizing the exegetical steps a preacher needs to follow in his study of OT narrative. These steps are listed in one of the helpful charts that the author has sprinkled throughout parts 1 and 2 of the book (77-78). In Appendix A (228-29), the writer also challenges the expositor to get his Hebrew up to speed and use it in his study of the OT text. He then proceeds to summarize and demonstrate how preachers can do discourse analysis from the Hebrew narrative texts (229-55). Further, building on Robinson’s concept of “the big idea,” i.e., the exegetical idea of the biblical passage that becomes foundational for the homiletical idea of the sermon, Mathewson proposes that the exegetical idea stage be divided into exegetical idea and theological idea. While the exegetical idea states the biblical writer’s intended meaning that reflects the time and culture of the original audience, “(t)he theological expression of the big idea states it in timeless language that applies to God’s people living in any stage of salvation history” (83). This insight is beneficial to the expositor of OT narrative, especially when he wrestles with the contemporary application of the biblical text (101-3).

Part 2, which deals with the construction of the sermon from the interpretation of the narrative, is recognized by the author to be the more difficult process. He writes, “Arriving at the exegetical summit with the author’s intended meaning is the easy part. It’s getting back down to deliver the goods to the congregation that’s hard” (94). Because there is more subjectivity in sermon preparation, Mathewson is more tentative in his suggestions in Part 2 that he was in Part 1. He does a good job of reminding the expositor of the basics of sermon preparation, i.e., determining the homiletical big idea, deciding the purpose of the sermon, specifying the introduction, body, and conclusion of the sermon. The expositor will find this discussion stimulating and challenging. The most difficult part of the sermon preparation process is outlining, especially in preaching biblical narrative (122-30). The writer opts for an inductive approach, because “while stories work inductively, outlines work deductively” (124). Therefore, the expositor of narrative should think in terms of “moves” instead of points, following the suggestion of David Buttrick in his book, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Fortress, 1987). The five sermon examples given in Part 3 of the present work (by Mathewson, Donald Sunukjian, Paul Borden, Haddon Robinson, and Alice Mathews) all follow the inductive, “moves’ approach. It is at this point that some readers, including the present reviewer, have their greatest tension with Mathewson’s suggestions. Although induction is the best approach to the study of the OT narratives, is it the best means of exposition? The biblical text is an objective revelation from God whose meaning

needs to be explained to a contemporary audience. For example, Ezra and the Levites “read from the book, from the law of God [which included narrative], explaining to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Neh 8:8). The inductive, “moves” approach implies that the hearer will discover the sense from a sermon, whereas a deductive, “point” approach implies that the expositor gives the sense to the hearer. It seems that the latter approach is more consistent with the biblical mandate. Therefore, this reviewer sees the approach of Dale Ralph Davis (see the review of *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury* above) as a better model of OT narrative preaching than the models found in the present volume.

Mattewson is to be commended for introducing the biblical expositor to the challenge of preaching OT narrative. He has issued a challenge that no evangelical pastor can ignore. This is a book that all expositors should read. There is much that is of value in its pages, although some of its suggestions need to be refined.

Russell D. Moore. *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004. 320 pp. \$15.99. Reviewed by Robert L. Thomas, Professor of New Testament.

The author is Dean of the School of Theology, Senior Vice President for Academic Administration, and Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also was the first Executive Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement. In this work Moore presents a strong case in favor of Kingdom theology.

Moore blames evangelical failure in the sociopolitical arena on an inadequate evangelical theology of the Kingdom. He heavily emphasizes the work of Carl F. H. Henry, particularly in his *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Right after World War II, Henry was a leader in the new evangelical movement that sought to cure evangelicalism of its fundamentalistic isolation from the activity of contemporary society and politics. Henry pushed strongly the theological case for evangelicalism in terms of a vigorous engagement with nonevangelical thought. According to Moore, Henry’s work and the new evangelical movement it helped to start forced evangelicals into a middle ground between fundamentalist social detachment and the liberal social gospel.

Moore continues in noting that evangelicalism was divided into two camps, the covenantalists and the dispensationalists with their differing view of the Kingdom, a division that hindered evangelicalism from having a united impact on the secular world. Debates between premillennialists and amillennialists were secondary matters to Henry (and apparently to Moore too). He lamented the absence of a united evangelical front with which to confront the secular society.

In Moore’s estimation, that united front has begun to emerge. His book refers repeatedly to an emerging consensus (e.g., 60, 69, 74, 96, 116, 153, 149, 152, 153, 157, 160, 167) that results from changes in both Dispensationalism and Covenant theology. The emerging consensus was facilitated by the exegetical and biblical theological syntheses of George Eldon Ladd, whose view of the Kingdom differed from the two dominant evangelical systems. Moore sees movements toward

a consensus in Progressive Dispensationalism, represented by Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy, and in Covenant theology, represented by Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Edmund Clowney, and Richard Gaffin.

Moore laments the fact that both dispensationalists and covenantalists miss the major point in identifying the seed of Abraham as Jesus of Nazareth. On this account dispensationalists err in giving the nation Israel a major role in the future millennium, and Covenant theologians err in their theories of “replacement theology.”

Moore offers a quite interesting theory regarding developments in evangelicalism since World War II, but his work is quite deficient in its practice of proof-texting without regard to the historical and contextual meanings of the Scriptures he cites. Such exegetical carelessness is devastating. His case for a unified, evangelical Kingdom theology does not appear to have a bright future.

Stephen Sizer. *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 2004). 298 pp. \$17.95. Reviewed by Robert L. Thomas, Professor of New Testament.

Steven Sizer is vicar of Christ Church, Virginia Water, Surrey, England, and Chairman of the International Bible Society (UK). His goal in the book is to demonstrate that “the convictions of Christian Zionists have made a significant contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (17). Sizer defines “Christian Zionism” as follows: “At its simplest, Christian Zionism is a political form of philo-Semitism, and can be defined as ‘Christian support for Zionism’” (19).

In discussing the history of the movement, the author notes that “proto-Christian Zionism predated and nurtured Jewish Zionism” and that “the contemporary Christian Zionist movement emerged only after 1967, alongside Messianic Zionism, in part in reaction to the widespread criticism Israel has endured over the last thirty-five years” (19). He sees dispensational Christian Zionism as the dominant form of Christian Zionism in America (23). Sizer traces the origin of Christian Zionism all the way back to the Reformation and shows how various individuals and organizations have been instrumental in promoting that cause. He sees Hal Lindsey as the most influential of all twentieth-century Christian Zionists (93).

Sizer is critical of what he calls the ultra-literal hermeneutic of Christian Zionism. He writes, “Therefore, the question is not whether the promises of the covenant are to be understood literally or spiritually; it is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of old covenant shadow or new covenant reality. The failure to recognize this principle is the basic hermeneutic error which Christian Zionists make and from which flow the other distinctive doctrines that characterize the movement” (135). By reading the NT back into the OT, the author asserts that the Jews are no longer God’s chosen people: “The idea that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a special status by virtue of the covenants made with the Patriarchs is in conflict with the clear and unambiguous statements of the New Testament” (149). Sizer presents the usual perspective of Covenant theology and

amillennialism in seeking to combat Christian Zionism.

He notes, “The Christian right came to influence US foreign policy largely through the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. His victory over Jimmy Carter gave a considerable boost to the Christian Zionist cause” (214). About 95% of the Christian tour groups that go to Israel never see or hear about the indigenous Christian church in Israel, he says. “The biblical literalism of Christian Zionism leads many to demonize Arabs and Palestinians as Satanic enemies of the Jewish people” (250). Sizer’s great regret is over injustices that have been inflicted on the Palestinian people, even those who are Christians. He sums up with the words, “In its apocalyptic and political forms especially, Christian Zionism distorts the Bible and marginalizes the universal imperative of the Christian message of equal grace and common justice” (259).

Sizer’s work is commendable in the amount of information it contains. Even though it is anti-dispensational, it contains a huge amount of information on dispensationalism about which most dispensationalists are unaware. The research has been thorough. Its major weakness lies in its hermeneutical approach. Sizer’s use of Scripture is superficial and beset with covenantal and amillennial preunderstandings. It is a book that seeks to discredit the role of Israel as seen through dispensationalist eyes. For those without deep roots in sound biblical hermeneutics, it may have an unfortunate impact. But for others who can withstand the storm of harsh accusations against Christian Zionism as a political force in today’s world, it will be instructive regarding present-day international policies, especially those of the United States.

James K. A. Smith. *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. 156 pp. \$17.99 (paper).  
Reviewed by Michael J. Vlach, Assistant Professor of Theology

Tertullian’s famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” is given a new twist by James K. A. Smith in his book, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* For Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, the question before the Christian church now is, “What has *Paris* to do with Jerusalem?” (10).

The aim of Smith’s book, which is part of the *The Church and Postmodern Culture* series, is to offer a non-technical introduction to postmodernism and to show how postmodernism should be a catalyst for the church to recover its authentic mission. He also attempts to show how the unholy trinity of French postmodern scholars—Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, when correctly understood, offers insights that “have a deep affinity with central Christian claims” (22).

Smith’s work has five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the concept of postmodernism and why Christians should be aware of the cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism. Chapters 2–4 are the heart of the book. Here Smith discusses how the primary postmodern thinkers Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault “can push us to recapture some truths about the nature of the church that have been overshadowed by modernity and especially by Christian appropriations

of modernism" (23). Chapter 5 is Smith's attempt to show how postmodernism can actually be a stimulus for authentic Christianity. Here Smith chastises the evangelical church for being too modern and relying on outdated concepts of objectivity, absolute truth, and Cartesian certainty. The postmodern church, on the other hand, is in a position to recapture important elements such as tradition, catholicity, the sacraments, community, liturgy, and aesthetics (136–143).

While trying to position himself between those who see postmodernism either as savior or devil, Smith clearly aligns himself with those who view postmodernism as a mostly positive development. In doing so, he also finds himself in agreement with much that is going on with the Emerging Church Movement, which has openly embraced postmodern concepts.

The most helpful part of this book for this reviewer was Smith's analysis of certain "bumper sticker" slogans that are most associated with postmodernism. For instance, Smith shows that Derrida's oft quoted statement, "There is nothing outside the text" is not a claim that only language exists and that everything else such as cups or tables do not. As Smith points out, Derrida is no linguistic idealist. Instead, what Derrida meant by "There is nothing outside the text" is that everything is subject to interpretation (39). Thus, even the most basic objects taken for granted, such as cups or forks, must be interpreted.

Smith also does a similar analysis of Lyotard's claim that postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives." Smith argues that Lyotard is not arguing against big stories or epics that tell an overarching tale about the world. Instead, what Lyotard is against are claims that metanarratives can be proven with certainty by appeals to universal reason. Smith also attempts to show the proper understanding of Foucault's statement, "Power is knowledge." Since even postmodern thinkers deserve to be understood in context (although some may not offer the same courtesy to us), Smith has done a good service by clearing up confusion on what these popular philosophers believed.

This reviewer did find fundamental points of disagreement with the book. First, while profiting from a clear explanation of what Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault meant by what they said, a convincing case was not made as to why the church should be interested in applying the ideas of these non-Christian philosophers. The church at various times in history has been influenced by non-Christian philosophers (Augustine–Plotinus, Aquinas–Aristotle.). Plus, there is no denying that non-Christian philosophers at times make statements compatible with Christianity (even stopped clocks are right twice a day). However, the Scriptures do not call on God's people to incorporate non-Christian philosophy into the church. In fact, the church is instructed to guard itself against the infiltration of worldly philosophies (see Col 2:8–10).

A second concern is that Smith promotes the common belief among postmodern scholars that no objective truth exists. Apparently, Smith has concluded that since all things are subject to interpretation and that all people have biases and presuppositions, then objective truth must not exist. However, the fact that certain factors make epistemic certainty difficult at times does not mean that absolute, objective truth does not exist.

In this reviewer's opinion, Smith's denial of objective truth has dangerous consequences such as holding that Christianity is not more objectively true than other

religions. For example, Smith claims the Christian understanding of reality is an interpretation and is no more objectively true than the Buddhist understanding: “Both are interpretations; neither is *objectively* true” (50).

Giving a readable summary of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault is no small task. For this Smith should be commended. Yet this reviewer remains unconvinced that Paris has much to do with Jerusalem or that Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault are wells from which the church should drink.

Ed Stetzer and David Putnam. *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006. xii + 244 pp. \$17.99 (cloth). Reviewed by Jason Sexton, TMS alumnus and Planting Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church, Shafter, California.

The purpose of the book is to “assist you in being able to think through your context, apply universal principles in your mission setting, and then identify and apply strategies that will make you more effective in your context” (2). Ed Stetzer is Research Team Director at the North American Mission Board (SBC), and David Putnam is Executive Pastor of Mountain Lake Church in Northern Forsythe County, Georgia. Both are seasoned church planters. This is the fourth book dealing with church planting and Emerging Church issues to which Stetzer has contributed. It accompanied the recent release of *Planting Missional Churches*, which is an updated version of *Planting Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Broadman and Holman, 2003).

This book assumes a shift in American culture to a “**glocal** community.” The term describes the “convergence of the **g**lobal reality with our **l**ocal reality,” which requires “new strategies for effective ministry” (5). The authors are not theorists, but practitioners. Their approach takes values developed from church planting and applies them to the context of established local churches which seek to reach their communities with the gospel.

The writers are theologically conservative. They emphasize the gospel of repentance and assert that when the church’s message becomes something other than “repentance and forgiveness of sins . . . the gospel itself is lost in the process” (39). They believe in a regenerated, active church membership (150). And they push for radical cultural awareness. They urge readers to act like a missionary would in a foreign culture, who usually learns local culture and people with the goal of introducing the gospel therein (217).

“Exegeting the culture” is not a new concept. It means that certain practices the missionary/planter/pastor is familiar with and embraces as his own “personal preferences” may not adapt to the culture he hopes to bring the gospel into. Accordingly, this book urges readers to lay aside personal preferences in order to embrace trans-cultural biblical principles in making disciples of all nations. As the book suggests, the best way to contextualize the gospel within a culture is to plant new churches.

Though this book has much to commend it, cautions are necessary. Being “missional” tends not to focus on one particular method over another, but certain methods may be more or less useful in a culture. What about employing methods in

a culture where conflicting views exist about what is moral or immoral? The “missiological” emphasis in the book is welcomed with caution. It seems to be too sociological. The authors state, “Missiology impacts how these things are done, but the Bible requires that certain things should be done” (53). Whereas this is a true statement, the dichotomy is not necessary. Does the Bible merely give overarching mandates with no propositional paradigms to employ? This statement is also contradictory since the writers are seeking to follow a “missional” approach whose paradigm they maintain has derived from Scripture.

Unfortunately, the book also sets forth ideas from contemporary missiology like “redemptive analogy” (96-97), the “man of peace” (218), and the mystical idea seeking to determine where God is working before knowing how to join Him (220-21). The book offers such “methods” as time-tested ways of doing ministry.

No perfect methodological approach to ministry exists, but wise evangelical pastors should pay attention to certain principles in this book. Yet that does not guarantee gospel success in a culture. Some lack of success may be due to a poor “missional” strategy or inability to faithfully contextualize the gospel. But in some cultures, churches will not be planted and communities will not be reached, even though one has done all of the work of loving people and contextualizing the gospel. The Bible suggests (cf. Luke 9:5; Acts 13:51; 16:7) that in some instances churches will not be planted and people will not be reached. Nevertheless, any missionary, planter, or pastor should be aware of cultural issues as this book urges.

The presentation of discipleship is also problematic. The authors say that people are “converted” to the community before they are “converted” to Christ, and present this as the proper discipleship process (105-6). Though this may work with church plants that often desperately need people, established churches should be more cautious when involving non-Christians in the community. The authors suggest that “code-breaking churches . . . create all kinds of opportunities for the unreached/unchurched to participate in service.” But like what? Where should unbelievers serve within a church? They do not give examples. And how should a pastor shepherd non-Christians once they are participating in the life of the community? Again, no examples are given.

The book calls it “sin” for evangelicals to be unwilling to depart from their personal preferences when seeking to reach a people. But should one always be so quick to divest himself of all personal preferences? This reviewer comes from a certain theological heritage, was trained at certain evangelical schools, and has come to embody certain practices often equated with the evangelical experience. The reviewer is currently a church planter, seeking to understand people within a certain culture to contextualize the gospel and plant a church among a certain people group, but to abandon a particular evangelical heritage and certain preferences does not seem wise. Should one leave his denomination because it is not largely welcome in a certain town? Humans do not live in a vacuum. The gospel is lived out in a diversity of contexts where evangelical churches are planted. It seems that the “glocal” church is most blessed by the interrelationship that faithful churches have with one another, while simultaneously knowing that every preferential cultural oddity is not culturally transcendent.

The major premise of *Breaking the Missional Code* is that the culture in North America is increasingly non-Christian, and that the church no longer enjoys

home field advantage. This reviewer agrees. Therefore what is needed is a heart change toward the Great Commission and a mentality shift to love people within any and every context. To this end, Stetzer and Putnam have produced a work that serves North American pastors, church planters, and leaders very well. Missionaries will also see this book as long overdue. Therefore, the reviewer cannot recommend it highly enough.

David F. Wells. *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. 339 pages with index. \$25.00 (cloth). Reviewed by William Varner, Professor of Biblical Studies at The Masters College.

For over a decade, David Wells, Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has provided the evangelical church (especially) with an informed theological critique of contemporary culture. The previous books in this series, *No Place for Truth* (1993), *God in the Wasteland* (1994), and *Losing our Virtue* (1998), mourned the loss of theological depth in contemporary culture by investigating its cultural, philosophical, and theological sources. One could sum up his critique by saying that the reality of God's truth, holiness, and power has been eclipsed by the tools and methods of the contemporary world. In other words, the evangelical church has been guilty of "worldliness" in ways far deeper than the practices of what we wear and what we enjoy in entertainment. There is "something rotten in the Denmark," and it has penetrated the so-called "Bible-believing" churches. The sad thing is that Christians oftentimes cannot see it until someone like Wells points it out.

Wells is a theologian of Reformed convictions, and he reaches deep into history, sociology, philosophy, literature, and other disciplines to develop his perspectives carefully. Also permeating his critique, similar to Francis Schaeffer, is a deep pastoral concern that manifests itself in constructive criticisms of church practice.

This work claims a Christological orientation, hence the subtitle: "Christ in a Postmodern World." To those who have read fairly deeply on the subject of postmodernism, much of what Wells articulates may not be new. He documents his claims so well, however, that even those experienced in that area will benefit from his analysis. In many cases, the first books to treat new topics are not typically the best. It is easy to see that Wells has been thinking about the subject for many years. Though this book builds on the foundation he laid in the previous three books in the series, not too much unnecessary repetition appears.

In his introduction he laments that the evangelical church lacks "a spiritual gravitas, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore" (4). *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* derives its title from Luther's famous line in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and attempts to inject Christological seriousness back into the evangelical mind and heart. The hymn presents the transcendence of God and the necessity for the church to depend on a transcendent God for its faithfulness. That is precisely what Wells

believes is becoming lost in evangelicalism today. To make his point, Wells elucidates the defining features of the postmodern world: how it emerged, what it is, and how Christians should respond to it.

To understand post-modernism, one must understand modernism. Wells devotes one chapter to this task, “Miracles of Modern Splendor,” in which he explains the arrogant optimism and rampant materialism in the West. The following chapter then addresses “Postmodern Rebellion,” in which the optimism of the modern period gives way to despairing of having a unified worldview at all.

Wells spends three chapters bringing a biblical Christology to bear on postmodern manifestations in philosophy, theology, and practical ecclesiology. He repeatedly makes clear that the church’s response to postmodernism must be rooted in objective truth, rooted in the Triune God who stands over all who are His creatures. He carefully explains how the gospel shatters human pride and proclaims that through Jesus Christ spiritual restoration is possible (see John 1:1-3, 14; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:5-11). The cosmic impact of the gospel, not just the inner spiritual changes, are brought to bear on life and thought in a most engaging manner.

In his past works, Wells has not hesitated to name names, and in this book he is no different. His critique of individuals, however, is not slanderous, for he always grounds his criticisms in a rigorous theological evaluation of their views. His comments about influential writers like Grenz (73, 126, 228-29) and Pinnock (242-51) illustrate his theological acumen.

The final chapter, “Megachurches, Paradigm Shifts, and The New Spirituality,” is one that fans of Wells will expect from his previous writings. He indicates how the megachurch and seeker-sensitive approaches to ministry actually appropriate the tools of postmodernity—principally marketing to consumer preferences—to the degree that theology becomes largely irrelevant. This is a theme he has stressed before, and he does not back off in this work. He illustrates how liberal churches have used megachurch growth models to increase their membership considerably, indicating that in all such instances people are most likely being drawn more by methodology than by theology. Wells lays the blame for much of this thinking on the “homogeneous unit principle” of missiologist Donald McGavran, who claimed that evangelism is most successful when people are not forced to cross any racial or economic barriers in order to come to Christ. The megachurch methodology has extended the principle to apply to generational barriers as well. Thus, churches target specific groups and tailor their services to fit specific preferences. The underlying assumption is that “the chief barrier to conversion is sociological and not theological” (289). By catering to certain preferences, and avoiding dislikes, so says the approach, people will more naturally come to Christ.

True to his theological calling, Wells points out the essentially Pelagian thinking that underlies that approach; it assumes that people do not stumble at the gospel, but how it is presented and because it does not fit their cultural preferences. He searingly analyzes, “Seeker methodology rests upon the Pelagian view that human beings are not inherently sinful, despite creedal affirmations to the contrary, that in their disposition to God and his Word, postmoderns are neutral, that they can be seduced into making the purchase of faith even as they can into making any other kind of purchase” (299). The answer to this theological defection, Wells declares, is a return to revealed, objective truth: “What distinguishes the Church from this

industry is truth. It is truth about God and about ourselves that displaces the consumer from his or her current perch of sovereignty in the Church and places God in the place where he should be" (303).

Occasionally this reviewer stops underlining important statements in a book, because he finds himself underlining nearly a whole page! Such is the case with this book. Wells has hit another home run. Whether or not his critique will overthrow the postmodern evangelical juggernaut depends, however, on how many recognize his worth and join his team! On the back cover, D. A. Carson writes, "Those who are serious about the gospel and about thoughtful cultural engagement will not want to miss this book." To that the reviewer can only add a hearty "Amen."

Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Message of Ezekiel*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001. 368 pp. \$16.00 (paper). Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

The author of this volume is the International Ministry Director of the Langham Partnership and has taught OT at All Nations Christian College in Ware, England. His many published writings include *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006), *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (IVP, 2006), *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2004), *Deuteronomy* (NIBC, Hendrickson, 1996), and *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (IVP, 1995).

As a series, The Bible Speaks Today purposes to present readable and accurate expositions of the biblical text in order to relate it to contemporary life. Therefore, Wright "felt free to organize the material with some degree of selection and with a division of the book into groups of related chapters" (12). Therefore, following a fairly complete introduction (17-42), the first chapter of the volume deals with Ezekiel's vision in 1:1-3:15 (43-63), the second chapter expounds Ezekiel's first year in ministry as presented in 3:16-5:17 (64-93), and an appendix provides brief notes on Ezekiel 6, 7, and 12 (94-96). The commentary's third chapter treats the exit of Yahweh's glory in 8:1-11:25 (97-126) and the fourth chapter is entitled "History with attitude (16:1-63; 23:1-49; 20:1-49)" (127-68), followed by an appendix of notes on Ezekiel 15, 17, and 19 (169-71). Chapter five asks "Who then can be saved? (14:12-23; 18:1-32; 33:10-20)" (172-210). The remaining chapters include "The turning point (24:1-27; 33:1-33)" (211-28), "'Then the nations will know that I am the LORD' (25:1-32:32)" (229-72), "The gospel according to Ezekiel (34:1-37:28)" (273-314), and "The glory of God revealed to the world and restored to his people (38:1-48:35)" (315-68).

This volume has much to commend. In his introduction, Wright argues for the unity of the Book of Ezekiel (40). Among the theological focuses that he identifies is the evangelistic nature of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry (32-35, 42). Discussing the idolatrous condition of Israel as depicted in 8:5-18, he connects Lev 26:40-42 with their need for confession and repentance (104). In fact, he repeatedly emphasizes the significance of Leviticus 26 to Ezekiel (151, 281, 298). Throughout his exposition of Ezekiel 18, he upholds the biblical doctrine of the natural

consequences of sin (181-90).

Although the author claims to perceive an eschatological fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecies (35), he does not interpret such prophecies literally (152 n. 77). Instead, fulfillment is tied to the ministry of Jesus Christ, the establishment of the NT church, and the mission of the church to the Gentiles. Wright's anti-literalist stance reaches a crescendo in his treatment of Gog and Magog (324-25). In the same vein, he claims that Ezekiel's description of the temple in chapters 40-48 is purely metaphorical (335). He assigns Ezekiel's temple vision to messianic fulfillment in Christ (341).

Discussing Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot (Ezekiel 1), Wright claims that the prophet "hijacks the Babylonian juggernaut and turns it into a vehicle for conveying the sovereign glory of Yahweh" and that the cherubim were familiar to Mesopotamian inhabitants (28-29). He fails to observe that Moses had written about such guardian cherubs existing at the very beginning of the history of fallen mankind (Gen 3:24). His identification of Daniel in Ezek 14:14 with the Dan'el of Ugaritic texts, rather than with the Daniel of Scripture (176), is debatable. Elsewhere, he denies any reference to Satan in 28:11-19, deflecting literal interpretation by an appeal to poetic language (244-46).

Wright's prose, in the highest traditions of the British, is pleasant to read for its cadence, color, and clarity. Expositors looking for commentaries that will improve their understanding and their presentation of the text need to read this volume. Sometimes exegetical detail is absent, but, like Wright (12), the reader can refer to Daniel Block's two-volume commentary in NICOT (Eerdmans, 1997) for such detail.