

# The Emerging Church - Part 1

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The emergent church is a rather slippery name for a rather slippery movement. By slippery, I mean that the movement is so new (originated in the late 1990s), so fragmented, so varied, that nailing it down is like nailing the proverbial Jell-O to the wall. There are no official leaders<sup>[1]</sup> or headquarters;<sup>[2]</sup> some have said that there are thousands of expressions yet only a few churches have sold out to the concept; and even those claiming the name can't agree on what is going on.<sup>[3]</sup> Brian McLaren, the closest thing to a spokesperson for the movement so far states: Right now Emergent is a conversation, not a movement. We don't have a program. We don't have a model. I think we must begin as a conversation, then grow as a friendship, and see if a movement comes of it.<sup>[4]</sup>

Having said this, there is still much common ground that can be identified. The name "emerging church" speaks of a church which is, guess what, emerging from something. This means, it is coming out of the more traditional understanding of the church and emerging into a postmodern expression. What it will actually become is still a matter of speculation, but its adherents see it as a postmodern church for a postmodern culture. Of course, even this gets tricky because the prefix "post" has become all too trendy. We hear not only of post-modern, but also of post-Christian, post-Protestant, post-analytical, post-liberal, post-conservative, post-everything. The problem with "post" is that it describes what you **are not** much better than it describes what you **are**. If you are no longer modern or Christian or liberal or conservative, what are you? McLaren believes that defining postmodern is premature<sup>[5]</sup> – we don't yet know what form it will take, so defining the postmodern church is even more problematic. Emergent church leaders do not all agree on where the church goes from here but they all believe that it must go somewhere, for they believe the modern church cannot connect with the postmodern mind. How this fleshes out will be dealt with later in our study; for now we can say the emergent church is a movement chasing a culture.

Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church*, says this is necessary because "the basis of learning has shifted from logic and rational, systematic thought to the realm of experience. People increasingly long for the mystical and the spiritual rather than the evidential and facts-based faith of the modern soil."<sup>[6]</sup> Kimball suggests that the seeker-sensitive church, the church that chased the last generation's culture, is already out of date: "The things that seeker-sensitive churches removed from their churches are the very things [postmodern] nonbelievers want to experience if they attend a worship service."<sup>[7]</sup> The postmodern wants to reconnect to the past. They want traditions and religious symbols rather than slick excellence, polished performance and state-of-the-art structures found in modernity. That translates into a very different look and feel. For example it is not likely that you will find a sign along the highway pointing to the First Baptist Emergent Church. Names like Baptist and denominational ties are too modern. Popular emergent church names are Solomon's Porch, House of Mercy, The Rock, Jacob's Ladder, Circle of Hope, Ikon, Vintage Faith, New Beginnings and Mosaic. They sponsor websites like vintagefaith.com, emergentvillage.org, and theooze.com. The emerging church appears to be the latest flavor of the day in a church age which allows itself to be defined by its culture rather than by Scripture. D. A. Carson reminds us: What drove the Reformation was the conviction, among all its leaders, that the Roman Catholic Church had departed from Scripture and had introduced theology and practices that were inimical to genuine Christian faith. In other words, they wanted things to change, not because they perceived that new developments had taken place in the culture so that the church was called to adapt its approach to the new cultural profile, but because they perceived that new theology and practices had developed in the church that contravened Scripture, and therefore that things needed to be reformed by the Word of God. By contrast, although the emerging church movement challenges, on biblical grounds, some of the beliefs and practices of evangelicalism, by and large it insists it is preserving traditional confessionalism by changing the emphases because the culture has changed, and so inevitably those who are culturally sensitive see things in a fresh perspective. In other words, at the heart of the emerging reformation lies a perception of a major change in culture.<sup>[8]</sup>

How does the Christian community go about chasing down the culture? Either through methods or message. The emerging church does both. Beginning with methodology, the leaders of the movement view the under-thirty generation as profoundly spiritual. They are interested in religious experiences and feelings. They want a sense of the supernatural. They are not interested in systematic theology, tightly woven apologetic arguments or logical reasoning. But they are attracted to spiritual mystery. Kimball quotes Garrison Keillor, who makes no claim of being a Christian, as saying, "If you can't go to church and at least for a moment be given transcendence, if you can't pass briefly from this life into the next, then I can't see why anyone would go. Just a brief moment of transcendence causes you to come out of the church a changed person."<sup>[9]</sup> Despite the fact that Keillor could not be more wrong if we are interested in true biblical transformation, the emergent leaders see this as the gateway to reaching the postmodern generations.

The Baby Busters (born between 1965 and 1983) and Mosaics (born between 1984 and 2002) are tired of "church-lite," consumer spirituality, church buildings that look like warehouses or malls, CEO pastors, educational programs structured like community colleges and church services that are reminiscent of a Broadway musical. They want the

transcendent, as Keillor says. So the emergent church loads up on such things. There is a return to what Kimball calls the “vintage church” which combines some excellent things such as singing of hymns, display of the cross and reading of Scripture with (questionable at best) medieval ritual, prayer stations, labyrinths, candles, incense, icons, stained glass, contemplative prayer, mantras, Benedictine chants, and darkness. Kimball makes the point that postmoderns want to experience God with all five senses – as the vintage church did. It should be pointed out, however, that the vintage church to which Kimball refers is not a return to the New Testament church. The vintage church has been waylaid by medieval Catholicism, which we must remember may have experienced the spiritual through the senses, but nevertheless was an apostate religion. Simply providing an unbeliever with a religious experience, which they might interpret as an encounter with God, may do them more harm than good. But just as the seeker-sensitive church saw felt-needs as the means of linking with unbelievers, so the emerging church sees spiritual experience as that means. The philosophy is basically the same, just the methods have changed.

Emergent leader Leonard Sweet describes the emergent church with the acronym EPIC. “E” stands for experiential because postmoderns desire more than listening and thinking. They want to enter into worship as an experience of the senses. This is why medieval rituals appeal to them. “P” speaks of participants as opposed to observers. They want an active faith. Rather than a sermon they might hold a “conversation.” “I” relates to image-based. Projected images, artwork, film and video are all attractive to this generation. They are sight-oriented. “C” means communal. They desire a strong sense of community. They are “people” persons. Instead of going to church they want to be the church.<sup>[10]</sup> There are some good things here but there are problems in the details, as we will see.

If this was the end of the story we might even find comfort in what is basically a reaction to the stripped-down model of Christianity that the seeker-sensitive church has given us for the last few decades. But as Rob Bell is quick to inform us, “This is not just the same old message with new methods. We’re rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life.”<sup>[11]</sup> This is something new in the cultural-identifying churches. The seeker-sensitive church loudly proclaimed that they were fine-tuning the methodology but were not tampering with the message of the evangelical church (even though they were). The emergent church is concerned about methods but they are even more concerned about the message. They believe that conservative evangelical Christianity has it all wrong. From the Scriptures to essential doctrines to the gospel itself, the church so far just doesn’t get it. And the emergent people include themselves in the same camp. As Brian McLaren states, “I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be saved?... None of us have arrived at orthodoxy.”<sup>[12]</sup>

### **Emergent Philosophy**

Before we jump into the doctrinal distinctives of the emerging church we must first detail the philosophy that undergirds the movement. What we see, read and perceive is filtered, at least to some degree, through our presuppositions and worldview. The worldview of the emerging church is decidedly postmodern. Attempting to combine postmodern philosophy with biblical theology is a tricky business, as one might imagine; we should not be surprised that unanimity in the understanding of this attempted merger will not be found. Nevertheless, some common threads are evident throughout the movement.

#### *Truth Claims*

Truth claims are held with suspicion within postmodernism and we find a precarious juggling act in emergent circles as they try to reach a wary culture with the claims of Christ. The emerging church is concerned about presenting genuine Christianity in a way the postmodern culture understands. Since the very heart of postmodernity is rejection of absolute authoritative truth, yet Christianity claims to be the proclamation of absolute authoritative truth, a head-on collision is almost unavoidable. What is to be done? Something has to give and that something seems to be truth. McLaren presents their view: Ask me if Christianity (my version of it, yours, the Pope’s, whoever’s) is orthodox, meaning true, and here’s my honest answer: a little, but not yet. Assuming by Christianity you mean the Christian understanding of the world and God, Christian opinions on soul, text, and culture...I’d have to say that we probably have a couple of things right, but a lot of things wrong, and even more spreads before us unseen and unimagined. But at least our eyes are open! To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall.<sup>[13]</sup>

This is almost a complete capitulation to postmodernity’s concept of truth. After 2000 years of the study of the completed Canon, we Christians find ourselves in a position of having maybe a “couple” of things right – and I am sure that those couple of things would be up for grabs. This uncertainty about the truth carries over to the Scriptures themselves, of course. Rob Bell and his wife Kristen, in an interview with *Christianity Today*, reflect this view. They started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself – “discovering the Bible as a human product.”<sup>[14]</sup> “I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible,” Kristen says, “that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means, and yet I feel like life is big again – like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.”<sup>[15]</sup> To the postmodern mind it is more important to, as Rob Bell says, “embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.”<sup>[16]</sup>

But how does a truly postmodern Christian live? How do they know what to believe? How do they deal with the issue of truth? How do they assimilate the realities of life? By creating their own reality. McLaren, if he could have his emergent dream come true, would “help students construct their own model of reality, their understanding of the

universe and story we find ourselves in. And – this is SO important – we’d teach them that their model isn’t reality; it’s just a model. It must be open to correction, adjustment, improvement, even revolution” (emphasis his).<sup>[17]</sup> Experience, not Scripture, becomes the basis for truth. “People today,” Leonard Sweet writes, “are starved not for doctrines but for images and relationships and stories.”<sup>[18]</sup>

There is no absolute truth or ultimate reality in the emergent agenda. Even Scripture is appreciated for its mystery, not its presentation of truth. Yet one has to wonder what Jude had in mind when he wrote, “I find it necessary to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (verse 3). The emergent church leaders are asking us to embrace a faith without truth, a Bible which has value due to its mystery, and a reality that is individual, subjective and changeable. This is touted as a new and improved version of Christian living. I fail to see the attraction, not to mention that no such understanding of truth is supportable by the Scriptures.

#### *Deconstruction*

The scholar would define deconstruction as Carson does: “It has to do with a literary approach, that hunts down tensions and inconsistencies in a text (those who deploy deconstruction insist that all texts have them) in order to set them at odds with each other and thus deconstruct the text, to generate new insights that might actually contradict what a text ostensibly says.<sup>[19]</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Humpty Dumpty gave his version, “When I use a word, it means what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”<sup>[20]</sup> In everyday language deconstruction means that we can never be certain that we have the right interpretation of words. What matters then is not what the author or speaker said, because that doubtfully can be discerned; rather the important thing is what did the reader/listener experience. Deconstruction guts words of their meaning and redefines them according to one’s own preference. This is obviously convoluted but it is a central piece in postmodern thought.

How does this work out in the postmodern church? In order to be consistent with absolute truth (or, better, lack of truth) the emergent thinkers must dispose of dogmatic truth claims (i.e. doctrines). They must purge the church of an exclusive gospel,<sup>[21]</sup> an authoritative Bible and irritating doctrines such as hell.<sup>[22]</sup> Also on the cutting floor is the doctrine of original sin. McLaren writes, “The church latched on to that old doctrine of original sin like a dog to a stick, and before you knew it, the whole gospel got twisted around it. Instead of being God’s big message of saving love for the whole world, the gospel became a little bit of secret information on how to solve the pesky legal problem of original sin.”<sup>[23]</sup> Before the emergent church leaders are done all the essential teachings of the Bible have been deconstructed, redefined or dismissed. And what has been put in their place? Oddly, but consistent with postmodern thinking, nothing but mystery and questions. Even McLaren admits, “What will appear beyond the deconstruction remains to be seen. Perhaps something better will emerge – that is my hope and prayer, but the outcome is by no means certain even now that I have finished writing this book.”<sup>[24]</sup>

#### *Pluralistic Relativism*

If nobody is right then everybody is right. This is the logical conclusion of the postmodern worldview. The emergent church thinkers are reluctantly willing to accept this concept, at least for a time. McLaren states: Because I and others, while we aren’t “for” pluralistic relativism, do see it as a kind of needed chemotherapy. We see modernity with its absolutisms and colonialisms and totalitarianisms as a kind of static dream.... In Christian theology, this anti-emergent thinking is expressed in systematic theologies that claim...to have final orthodoxy nailed down.... Emergent Christians see pluralistic relativism as a dangerous treatment for stage IV absolutist/colonial/totalitarian modernity (to use language from cancer diagnosis), something that saves a life by nearly killing it.<sup>[25]</sup>

Since truth and Scripture have been deconstructed all that is left is relativism. Until we figure out where to go from here we will have to be content with that. We may or may not arrive at a better place some day, but at least objective truth claims are being eradicated – and that is a good thing. So says the emergent church leaders. Part 2 next issue.

## Notes

- [1] Recognized, but not official leaders of the movement at this time include: Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt, Leonard Sweet, the late Mike Yaconelli, Spencer Burke, Erwin McManus, Tommy Kyllonen (aka Urban D) and Donald Miller. Some see Richard Foster and Dallas Willard as key mentors for the movement.
- [2] Some of the promoters of the emerging church include Youth Specialties, The Ooze and The Emergent Village.
- [3] See Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique", *Christianity Today*, November, 2004, pp. 36-41, This article described the excitement and chaos at the 1994 Emergent Convention in Nashville.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p.39.
- [5] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, ( San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp.19-22. In many ways the emergent church can trace its birth to the publication of this book.
- [6] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, ( Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p.60.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p.115.
- [8] D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, ( Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p.42.
- [9] Kimball, p.143.
- [10] <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/interview.html>
- [11] *Christianity Today*, p.38.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- [13] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* ( Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.293.
- [14] *Christianity Today*, p.38.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, p 162.
- [18] Leonard Sweet, Andy Crouch, et al., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Leonard Sweet, ed., ( Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.35.
- [19] D. A. Carson, p.84.
- [20] Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (<http://www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06.htm>).
- [21] Kimball, p.175.
- [22] McLaren's book, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, is primarily a deconstruction of the doctrine of hell.
- [23] Brian McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, ( San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p.134.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p.XVIII.
- [25] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, pp.286-287.

# The Emerging Church - Part 2

(May 2006 - Volume 12, Issue 5) By Gary E Gilley (Pastor Teacher; Southview Chapel)

Our worldview will determine how we process information and in turn what we believe. In theory, at least, Christians should possess a biblical worldview shaped by the study of Scripture. In actuality, too often our philosophy of living (worldview) is formed by other forces around us including our culture. This is an accusation often cast at the evangelical church by the emerging church leaders. They say that evangelicalism has been shaped by modernity – that what we believe is not drawn so much from Scripture as it is from the Enlightenment. This indictment should not be cast aside too quickly; there is some truth to it. We must ever be careful that we trace our beliefs to Scripture and not take detours constructed by men. But having read the specific allegations coming from the emerging camp, I find that most do not hold water and are thrown out more to put us on the defensive and justify their beliefs than to accurately portray the teachings of the conservative church. When the smoke has cleared we discover that our fundamental doctrines find their basis in Scripture after all. But the same cannot be said for emergent teachings. Their doctrines have been more than tainted; they have been fashioned by postmodernity. Let's take a look through the lens of emergent philosophy at some of the major doctrines.

## Emergent Doctrine

### *In General*

Al Mohler, theologian and president of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, provides this scathing comment:

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>[1]</sup>

Most emergent church leaders claim fidelity to the Scriptures as well as the historic doctrines and even creeds of the church. Sounds good on the surface – but then they force these things through the filter of postmodern deconstruction and what comes out are distorted and unrecognizable understandings of theology. Dan Kimball says that the church must “deconstruct, reconstruct, and redefine biblical terms.”<sup>[2]</sup> Brian McLaren would agree, saying that our old theological systems are flawed and something new is needed.

I meet people along the way who model for me, each in a different way, what a new kind of Christian might look like. They differ in many ways, but they generally agree that the old show is over, the modern jig is up, and it's time for something radically new.... Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial strength version is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision.<sup>[3]</sup>

Rob Bell chips in to make certain we understand that these men are talking about more than methodology, “By this I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music, sharper graphics, and new methods with easy-to-follow steps. I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived and explained.”<sup>[4]</sup>

How far is Bell willing to take all of this? Which doctrines can be changed, altered or even eliminated before we no longer have the Christian faith? Apparently nothing is off limits. While personally claiming to affirm historic Christian theology, Bell writes that it would not bother him to discover that we have been wrong all along concerning the basic elements of the faith. For example, if it could be proven “that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry... and that the virgin birth was just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in.... Could you still be a Christian?”<sup>[5]</sup> Bell doesn't see a problem. As a matter of fact, if our faith depends on such doctrines “then it wasn't that strong in the first place, was it?”<sup>[6]</sup>

What doctrines does Bell regard as dispensable? In this brief statement alone he sees as superfluous the virgin birth, the incarnation, the hypostatic union of Christ and the inspiration of Scripture (since the Gospel writers lied about the person of Christ). Of course, like dominos, as these doctrines fall they take others with them, not the least of which would be the substitutionary atonement since a mere man could not die for our sins. In one stroke of the pen Bell has undermined the whole Christian faith, but he sees it as a non-issue. To Bell, and other emergent leaders, Jesus is not the way and the truth, if by that we mean He is the embodiment of truth and the only way to God. No, to these men the “way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.”<sup>[7]</sup> We could continue to live the “Christian life” without the truth of Scripture. We could still love God and be a Christian, because what we believe is not important. The only question is, “Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to life?”<sup>[8]</sup> It is not about what we believe, Bell would insist. “Perhaps a better question than who's right, is who's living rightly?”<sup>[9]</sup>

McLaren reinforces this major tenant of emergent “theology:” “We place less emphasis on whose lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology are right and more emphasis on whose actions, service, outreach, kindness, and effectiveness are good.”<sup>[10]</sup> “A turn from doctrines to practices”<sup>[11]</sup> is one of the four major legs that the emerging church stands on, according to McLaren. Being, rather than believing, is a major component in the emergent philosophy. The New Testament, on the other hand, does not sacrifice one for the other. We are called in Scripture to live godly lives, but first we must believe (John 1:12; Roman 10:9-10; Ephesians 2:8-9). Christlike living is a fruit of salvation, not the cause. We can “be” moral and decent people and not be Christians, but we cannot deny or ignore the true historic, biblical person and work of Jesus Christ and be saved. The emergent church has turned this truth on its head. Mark Oestreicher, president of Youth Specialties, makes these comments in *The Emerging Church* which are not only dangerously close to a denial of the gospel itself but actually cross the line:

Does a little dose of Buddhism thrown into a belief system somehow kill off the Christian part? My Buddhist cousin, except for her unfortunate inability to embrace Jesus, is a better “Christian” (based on Jesus’ descriptions of what a Christian does) than almost every Christian I know. If we are using Matthew 26 as a guide, she’d be a sheep; and almost every Christian I know personally would be a goat.<sup>[12]</sup>

#### *A Few Specifics*

**The doctrine of God:** Even though Jesus has come to reveal and explain the Father (John 1:14, 18), “God,” McLaren insists, “can’t ever really be an object to be studied.”<sup>[13]</sup> To emergent leaders theology is not a matter of knowing God but a quest for beauty and truth.

**The doctrine of original sin:** McLaren writes, “Many of us have grown uneasy with this understanding of ‘the fall’ (and with it an exaggerated understanding of the doctrine of ‘original sin’). We are suspicious that it has become a kind of Western Neo-Platonic invasive species that ravages the harmonious balance inherent in the enduring Jewish concepts of creation as God’s world.”<sup>[14]</sup>

**The substitutionary atonement:** One of the characters in McLaren’s book *The Story We Find Ourselves In* goes beyond questioning the purpose and need of Christ’s death for us, or even the unfairness of one dying for others. “That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?”<sup>[15]</sup>

**The TULIP:** You don’t have to be a Calvinist to find McLaren’s deconstruction of the famous TULIP ridiculous. The acronym has historically stood for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. McLaren says he too is a Calvinist but he comes up with his own TULIP: Triune love, unselfish election, limitless reconciliation, inspiring grace and passionate, persistent saints.<sup>[16]</sup>

When deconstructing and reconstructing takes place at this level it is not hard to understand the difficulty involved in communication. As Al Mohler wrote recently on his blog,

McLaren claims to uphold “consistently, unequivocally and unapologetically” the historic creeds of the church, specifically the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. At the same time, however, he denies that truth should be articulated in propositional form, and thus undercuts his own “unequivocal” affirmation.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### **The doctrine of hell**

So odious is the doctrine of hell to the emergent community that McLaren devoted his latest book, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, to the subject. McLaren introduces his subject with an exaggerated distortion of the evangelical position,

*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, and if you don’t love God back and cooperate with God’s plans in exactly the prescribed way, God will torture you with unimaginable abuse, forever – that sort of thing. Human parents who ‘love’ their children with these kinds of implied ultimatums tend to produce the most dysfunctional families...*<sup>[18]</sup> (emphasis his).

If the idea of hell is so ridiculous then why did Jesus teach it? McLaren concocts a fanciful view that the Jews during the intertestamental period wove together the mythological views of the Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, the Zoroastrian and Persian religions and created hell. When Jesus came on the scene the Pharisees were using hell as a club to keep the people in line. Through the threat of hell the Pharisees could motivate sinners to stop sinning and then perhaps God would send the Messiah along with His kingdom. Jesus takes the Pharisees’ club and turns it on them. Jesus didn’t really believe in or endorse hell, as we understand it; He just used it as a “truth-depicting model.”<sup>[19]</sup> Jesus used hell “to threaten those who excluded sinners and other undesirables, showing that God’s righteousness was compassionate and merciful, that God’s kingdom welcomed the undeserving, that for God there was no out-group.”<sup>[20]</sup>

This convoluted argumentation leads to there being “no out-group.” If there is no out-group, does that mean McLaren is a universalist? While he flirts with this possibility stating, “Universalism is not as bankrupt of

biblical support as some suggest,"[21] he never firmly lights on it.[22] But without question McLaren does hold to the doctrine of inclusivism which teaches that while salvation has been made possible by Jesus Christ, it is not necessary to know who Jesus is or the precise nature of what He has done.[23] Emergent church leaders follow the reasoning of missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin's position concerning Christ and salvation which runs along these lines: Exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation of 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 Christian, but not in the sense of viewing other religions as salvific.[24] In other words, salvation is not exclusively found in the gospel, therefore there are saved Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and so forth. Soon hell becomes a mute issue because no one seems to be going there anyway.

### The doctrine of salvation

The doctrine of hell is determined to a large degree by the all-important understanding of the gospel. The emergent leaders see a wide gate opening to eternal life. "It bothers me to use *exclusive* and *Jesus* in the same sentence. Everything about Jesus' life and message seemed to be about inclusion, not exclusion,"[25] writes McLaren (emphasis his). He adds later in his discussion, "Maybe God's plan is an opt-out plan, not an opt-in one. If you want to stay out of the party, you can. But it's hard for me to imagine somebody being more stubbornly ornery than God is gracious." [26] The clear implication is that we are all "in" unless we want "out." But the next question is (and this is where it gets tricky) in or out of what? The short answer is "the kingdom of God." But the short answer leads to a long explanation that leaves us scratching our heads (which is appropriate since the emergent people prize mystery over clarity).

The gospel, according to the emergent thinkers, is not about individual conversion. It is not about how to get people "in." It is about "how the world will be saved from human sin and all that goes with it..."[27] This sounds close to the mark until we examine more thoroughly what is meant by the terminology. Their concept of "world" does not simply involve humans who don't believe in Christ. The emergent gospel is not just bringing unbelievers to the Savior for the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of God's righteousness. There is more, as Rob Bell informs us,

Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker. This has huge implications for how people present the message of Jesus. Yes, Jesus can come into our hearts. But we can join a movement that is as wide and as big as the universe itself. Rocks and trees and birds and swamps and ecosystems. God's desire is to restore all of it.[28]

McLaren continues the thought: "Is getting individual souls into heaven the focal point of the gospel? I'd have to say no, for any number of reasons. Don't you think that God is concerned about saving the whole world?... It is the redemption of the world, the stars, the animals, the planets, the whole show." [29] You see, "The church exists for the world – to be God's catalyst so that the world can receive and enter God's kingdom more and more." [30] When asked to define the gospel, Neo (the main philosophical character in McLaren's novels) replies that it could not be reduced to a little formula, other than "the Kingdom of God is at hand." [31] Narrowing this definition is not easy, but McLaren gives some insight when he writes,

I am a Christian because I believe that, in all these ways, Jesus is saving the world. By the "world" I mean planet Earth and all life on it, because left to ourselves, un-judged, un-forgiven, and un-taught, we will certainly destroy this planet and its residents.[32]

As we are discovering, the emerging church is very concerned with the planet, with the ecosystems, pollution and the environment; so much so that apparently in some sense Christ died for the physical planet and it is the job of the follower of Christ to help restore and protect this world. He is also troubled with injustice. McLaren asks, "And could our preoccupation with individual salvation from hell after death distract us from speaking prophetically about injustice in our world today?" [33] Emergent leaders have a deep concern that if we are preoccupied with who is "in" and who is "out," who is going to heaven and who is not, we will ignore present physical needs of the planet and social issues like injustice, poverty and AIDS.

McLaren argues, "When Matthew, Mark, and Luke talk about the Kingdom of God, it's always closely related to social justice.... The gospel of the kingdom is about God's will being done on earth for everybody, but we're interested in getting away from earth entirely as individuals, and into heaven instead." [34] Martin Luther King is given by McLaren as an example of one who had the right gospel emphasis.[35] They fault the evangelical church for being too wrapped up in eternity to care about what is happening right now on planet earth and with being too anxious over who is saved from sin to notice who is suffering from man's inhumanity to man.

It does not seem to be an option to the emergent church that both social injustices and eternal redemption can be and have been attended to by God's people. But, despite opinions to the contrary, the priority of Scripture is on man's relationship to God. It is because men are alienated from God that they mistreat one another. The spiritually redeemed and transformed person should and will care about social sins. But,

again, the gospel is about man's alienation from God and what He has done through Christ to reconcile us to Himself (Romans 5:6-11), not about the ozone layer and elimination of poverty. Neither Jesus nor the apostles made these latter things the focus of their ministries; it was the reconciliation of souls to God that was at the heart of their message. Once we begin to draw our gospel from the culture, no matter what culture that might be, we have altered the true gospel. Emergent leaders are not wrong to be concerned about the environment and social injustice; they are wrong to confuse it with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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## Notes

- [1] Quoted by David Roach, "Leaders Call 'Emerging Church Movement' a Threat to Gospel," BP News, March 23, 2005, (<http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/Articles/www.ews.net/bpnews.asp?id=20420>).
- [2] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 178.
- [3] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. XIV-XV.
- [4] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005), p. 12.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 20 (cf. p. 21).
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- [10] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), p. 223.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- [12] Kimball, p. 53.
- [13] McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, p. 161.
- [14] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 235.
- [15] Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 102.
- [16] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, pp. 195-197.
- [17] Al Mohler, (<http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/Articles/www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?adate=2/16/2005#1313087>).
- [18] Brian McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. XII.
- [19] *Ibid.*, pp. 61-64, 71-79.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 103 (cf. pp. 182-183).
- [22] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 37.
- [23] McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, p. 182.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- [28] Bell, pp. 109-110.
- [29] McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, p. 129.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- [32] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 97.
- [33] McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, p. 84.
- [34] *Ibid.*, p. 149. McLaren has adopted N.T. Wright's understanding of the gospel which is termed the New Perspective. The New Perspective says that we have misunderstood the New Testament and that the real issue of such books as Romans is not to explain the gospel but how to bring Jews and Gentile together in the Kingdom of God (see pp. 149-153).
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

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