

# The Emergent Church Movement OF BRIAN D. McLAREN

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

## The Role of Brian McLaren

Brian McLaren is clearly at the center of the Emergent Church Movement. He writes:

In 2001, I met with Doug Pagitt. . . . Doug is . . . pastor of Solomon's Porch ([www.solomonsporch.com](http://www.solomonsporch.com)) in Minneapolis, former leader of YLN [Young Leader Networks], and (then was) still well shy of 40. One of us—I can't remember which . . . came up with a new name for the group: *emergent* ([www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)). We had no idea how fitting the name was and how helpful it would be in our ongoing work (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 313).

So the name “emergent,” as applied to churches of this movement (or “conversation,” as they prefer to call it), originated in association with Brian McLaren, and he has been the chief spokesman for it ever since. For example, in his book *Becoming Conversant With The Emergent Church*, D. A. Carson says Brian McLaren is the one “. . . whom most emergent leaders regard as their preeminent thinker and writer” (p. 157).

As in any movement, there is a wide range of pastors and writers who consider themselves “conversant” with the movement. There are also churches that have many of the same beliefs but would not consider themselves attached to the movement. Also, many of its followers claim that the Emergent Movement is not an organization one joins but a fellowship or “conversation” of people who want to reach today's post-modern young people with the Gospel, and (they claim) no movement should be evaluated by its extremists. For example, Dr. Scot McKnight concludes:

. . . apart from the really oddball practices that we occasionally hear about or the really off-the-wall piece of theology proclaimed with attitude and hubris, the EM [Emergent Movement] is a post-Evangelical group of young Christians who are doing what they can to get the Church back in line with the Kingdom vision of Jesus. My suggestion is that we listen and learn what the Spirit is saying to the Church (*Trying to Become Conversant with the Emerging Movement*, p. 11).

Fair enough. It's primarily a movement, not an organization, and not everybody in it is a spokesman. But this is a movement that has an identifiable theological and philosophical framework. Its church leaders promote each other, invite each other to speak in their meetings, sell each other's books, and link to each other's web sites. And at the center of it all is Brian McLaren.

Also, it is not just a loose fellowship. McKnight reports: “Emergent–US is an organization with a Board and a National Coordinator (Tony Jones). He is joined with other Board members: Brian McLaren, Ivey Beckwith, Tim Keel, And Chris Seay” (*Ibid.*, p. 1). So, the Emergent Church Movement now has a National Director. They also have a Chairman of the Board of Directors of Emergent–US, none other than Brian McLaren. Slowly, they are becoming structured—something they claim they despised in “traditional” churches.

It might be reasonable to say people like Doug Pagitt (mentioned above) or Rob Bell (pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan) are on the fringes of the movement with “oddball practices” or some “off-the-wall piece of theology proclaimed with attitude and hubris.” But Brian McLaren is no fringe participant. Those wishing to identify with, or even remain sympathetic toward, the Emergent Movement cannot separate themselves (in the mind of even the most casual observer) from the views of McLaren. And, as a matter of fact, there is very little difference in theology and philosophy of ministry between Brian McLaren and, say, Rob Bell. Actually, if anything, McLaren is probably more balanced in his approach than most. So this paper is an evaluation of Brian D. McLaren's concept of the Emergent Movement, as he presents it in his books, articles, and interviews.

## The Use of the Term “Emergent”

The Emergent Movement tends to put evangelicals into 3 categories:

1. The TRADITIONAL EVANGELICALS, who center their approach on Bible exposition with pulpits, pews, organs, and Phymns, with occasional contemporary music. An example would be Moody Church in Chicago.
2. The PRAGMATIC EVANGELICALS, who have baby boomer values, attempting to build mega churches or seeker churches with entertaining programs. An example would be the Willow Creek Community Church in Northern Illinois.
3. The EMERGENT EVANGELICALS who attempt to relate to the post-modern culture and reach out to the world. The emergent evangelicals refute #1 and tolerate #2.

The Emergent Evangelicals would have us believe that the Traditional Evangelicals are a relic from the past and insensitive to the needs and thinking of our post-modern world. Emergent Evangelicals are more tolerant of the Pragmatic Evangelicals but feel they will be forced to become emergent-like if they are to survive. But if we view these categories from a biblical perspective, their value looks very different. The Traditional Evangelicals (with all their legalistic traditional faults) teach doctrine and the plan of salvation from an infallible Bible. The Pragmatic Evangelicals still believe the same doctrines (buried in their doctrinal statements), but they don't teach them much or they put them in very simplistic terms. But they still preach a biblical Gospel. The Emergent Evangelicals have gone a significant step beyond that. They have changed the doctrines themselves, including the Gospel.

If a Traditional Evangelical wanders into an emergent church, he is likely to leave because he recognizes (after a time) that something is wrong. The Pragmatic Evangelical who wanders into an emergent church is more likely to stay because he has only heard the true doctrines of Scripture taught in vague terms, if at all, so he has no capacity to discern the false teaching. This is especially true because Emergent Evangelicals tend to not teach doctrine either and to present their views in metaphorical terms. Many evangelicals go to Emergent Churches because the young people like it there, and the parents figure it's good that the kids are hearing something about Jesus in a presentation they enjoy. But it is actually an indoctrination of those young people into a post-modern "Jesus," a false gospel, and a metaphorical message that tolerates post-modern values and leaves them with an insufficient Bible.

So the departure is not confined to methods. Much of the theological baby is thrown out with the methodological bath water. Primarily, they are critical of the traditional evangelical beliefs in premillennialism, verbal inerrancy of Scripture, Christ being the only way for salvation, the nature of sin, and the necessity of judgment, and the mission of the church. So in what sense is it legitimate for them to call themselves "Evangelicals" at all? Traditional Evangelicals use the term "Evangelical" to refer to those who believe in an infallible Bible and the promotion of the biblical Gospel. McLaren believes in neither the infallibility of the Bible nor the biblical Gospel. His calling himself an evangelical makes him sound like a good guy of that sort but, as a matter of fact, he has changed the definition of the word "Evangelical" to fit his "emerging" theology.

## The Meaning of the Term "Emergent"

In a word, the term "emergent" is just another way to say **evolution**. The Emergent Movement of Brian McLaren is simply the principles of evolution applied to the Christian religion. With all his emphasis on moving beyond the old ideas of modernism and into post-modernism, his whole movement is an idea of modernism. Evolution was conjured up in the midst of the naturalism of the 1800s. There is nothing new about it. Even the idea of applying it to Christianity is not new. Darwin applied the theory of evolution to biology, but others soon applied it to psychology, sociology, politics, economics, and religion. The Liberals of Germany and England applied it to Christianity. Karl Barth called it Neo-orthodoxy and Brian McLaren calls it *A Generous Orthodoxy*, but both are simply the principles of evolution applied to Christianity.

The following paragraph is an extensive quote from McLaren's book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Chapter 19, entitled *Why I Am Emergent*. This is significant because he says, "Emergent thinking has been an unspoken assumption behind all my previous books."

A simple diagram can illustrate what we mean by *emergent thinking*. Think of a cross section of a tree. Each ring represents not a replacement of the previous rings, not a rejection of them, but an embracing of them, a comprising of them, and inclusion of them in something bigger. ... The soil in which the tree grows, of course, consists of the decayed remnants of its ancestors. ... In whatever ways Protestants feel they emerged from Catholicism—or in whatever ways post-Vatican II Catholics feel they emerged from pre-Vatican II Catholicism—they can't despise their roots or reject their past. ... We constantly emerge from what we were and are into what we can become—not just as individuals, but as participants in the emerging realities of families, communities, cultures, and worlds. ... It caused ancient Christians to emerge from first-century Judaism. It caused their descendants to emerge from apostolic Christianity to the era of the martyrs and apologists, showing both courage and intelligence in dealing with their **evolving** situation. ... It caused modern Christianity (in its Protestant and Catholic forms) to emerge from its late-medieval stage. And it is causing new forms of Christian spirituality, community, and mission to emerge from modern Western Christianity (pp. 315-322, emphasis mine).

McLaren's approach to Christianity is one of historical evolution, not biblical truth. I feel sorry for him because he gives no evidence of ever actually considering the truth of the message of the Bible or the God of the Bible. For example, Chapter 1 of the above mentioned book is entitled *Seven Jesuses I Have Known* (pp. 49-76). These are: "The Conservative Protestant Jesus, The Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus, The Roman Catholic Jesus, The Eastern Orthodox Jesus, The Liberal Protestant

Jesus, The Anabaptist Jesus, and The Jesus of the Oppressed.” But not once does he consider the Jesus of the Bible. For instance, on page 78, he writes:

For too many people the name *Jesus* has become a symbol of exclusion, as if Jesus’ statement “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me” actually means, “I am in the way of people seeking truth and life. I won’t let anyone get to God unless he comes through me.” The name of Jesus, whose life and message resonated with acceptance, welcome, and inclusion, has too often become a symbol of elitism, exclusion, and aggression.

So Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the One in the Bible who really lived and died for our sin, is replaced by the name Jesus, and it’s a name which can only resonate *acceptance welcome, and inclusion*.

McLaren’s approach is one of examining Christianity as a religion, comparing its various forms, and projecting its evolution into the post-modern age. The Bible, to him, is like the inside of the trunk of the tree. It is part of our history but dead wood, not to be modeled for any serious Christian. It is like the ape or Neanderthal from which we supposedly evolved/emerged—we should embrace him as part of our history but certainly not follow him as a model for today or tomorrow. So I guess the apostles’ understanding that *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) is just something out of the prehistoric past of Christianity. It is part of the pulp of the tree trunk but not a message that resonates today.

The same seems to be true of McLaren’s view of God and the Trinity. On pages 84-85 (*Ibid.*), he writes:

Eventually, after a few centuries of reflecting on God as revealed and experienced through Jesus (in the context of some major controversies with varied forms of Greek philosophy), the church began to describe God as Father-Son-Spirit in Tri-unity or the Trinity. For them, God could no longer be conceived of merely as “God A,” a single, solitary, dominant Power, Mind, or Will, but as “God B,” a unified, eternal, mysterious, relational community/family/society/entity of saving Love. ... I find myself in universe B, getting to know God B.

So, according to McLaren, our understanding of God is a product of the evolution of the early church, with the help of controversies and Greek philosophy.

McLaren’s idea of the Christian religion emerging into a worldwide Kingdom of God is actually very old. It is the foundation of Liberalism. Liberals always see themselves as progressives—those who are progressing or evolving or emerging on to some better world order. McLaren says he is post-conservative and post-liberal. Well, okay. But for those of us who live in this world, the one which actually exists today, he is a classic, typical, normal, run-of-the-mill Liberal, following the rather well-worn path of social cultural religious evolution. The only thing new is that he is calling it “emergent.” The Emergent Movement is not post-modern Evangelicalism, it is post-modern Liberalism.

## Ethics and Moral Tolerance in the Emergent Movement

Moral issues are dealt with from the perspective of humanism in the Emergent Movement. It’s all about what is good for people, not what is commanded by God. The result is that the Bible is marginalized, and diluted until it is irrelevant. For example, here is D. A. Carson’s presentation of McLaren’s answer to the question of homosexuality during one of his workshops (*Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church*, pp. 34-35):

McLaren asserts that there is no good position, because all positions hurt someone, and that is always bad. Moreover, homosexuality may be seventy-five different things. By way of analogy, consider schizophrenia, which, though it is a complex and not uncommon disease, is not mentioned in the Bible. The closest thing to it in the Bible, phenomenologically, is demon-possession. But are we prepared to say that every instance of schizophrenia should be labeled demon-possession, so as to preserve biblical categories? Similarly, contemporary homosexuality is a complex phenomenon, and it is not entirely clear that what we mean by homosexuality in any particular instance entirely lines up with what the Bible says about homosexuality.

Why would we assume that when the Bible talks about demon possession it is not referring to demon possession? Why do we need to subdivide homosexuality into *seventy-five different things*? If I can define seventy-five different kinds of adultery, some of which are not described in the Bible, would that make the Bible’s condemnation of it not relevant? The one thing you can be pretty sure of is that when Brian McLaren finishes discussing a subject, the Bible is insufficient, if not irrelevant.

## Sin and the Emergent Movement

While discussing his tree trunk model of Christianity, McLaren writes:

Sin, in this model, can be understood as lower levels or rings resisting the emergence of higher levels or rings. ... sin mucks up God's original intent for the story of creation, sabotaging emergence by replacing it with stagnation and decay. Because of this counter-emergent virus we call sin, the stages, episodes, and levels don't always unfold as they should (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 320).

Although I figured I could pretty well guess what McLaren considered to be a sin *virus*, I really wanted to hear it from him. Well, I found it. In his book *The Church on the Other Side*, he writes about several of these viruses. One is what he calls "The Objective/Analytic/Reductionist Virus" (p. 193). His illustrations of this virus/sin include: "Bible exposition (aka objective textual analysis)" and "Bible scholarship (... competence at applying modern analytical tools to Bible study)." Another virus/sin he calls "The Virus of Individualism" (p. 195). The first illustration of this virus/sin is "that Christianity was reduced to being a story about how to get a personal Savior—how to get my personal soul into heaven rather than hell. The virus of individualism was an autoimmune disease in the Body of Christ; it made parts of the body not recognize they were organically united to other parts" (pp. 195-196).

So, for McLaren, sin is a cultural setback to the emergence of Christianity into a conversant religion of tolerance and metaphors, which joins all other religions in bringing in good things on earth. That sin includes trying to understand what the author of the Bible actually meant (which is, and has always been, objective and determined analytically). For McLaren, an accurate understanding of the Bible as a source of objective/absolute truth is like looking at the dead pulpy center of a tree to determine its growth—like studying a cave man to figure out how we should live today. He is all for Bible study, of course, as long as it is subjective, poetic, and mystical. The Bible should be studied like an ancient artifact in a museum or a piece of abstract art, which inspires us to get whatever meaning we can imagine. And like any ancient artifact, the Bible has value but it is not the inerrant Word of God, and it must be applied selectively.

McLaren sees the gospel message, that people are individually lost without Christ and must make an individual decision to receive Christ (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5), as divisive. He thinks it divides the body of Christ because it excludes Liberals and some Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox who don't believe that. For him, "the Body of Christ" is **not** all those who have individually received Christ but all those who call themselves Christians and ultimately everybody everywhere. The biblical concept of individual believers standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10), or individual unbelievers standing before the Great White Throne Judgment and being thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15) is impossible for McLaren. This stands directly in the way of his basic concept of ministry. Ministry, for McLaren, is "missional" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, pp. 115-125). That does not mean that the church sends out missionaries to reach people for Christ but that the individual merges (or "emerges") into the church, which, in turn, merges into the world, which eventually, by our emerging into it, becomes the Kingdom of God. He writes: "... I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus *and* remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts" (*Ibid.*, p. 293).

The most immediate question that comes to mind here is: How does he know which things are indeed viruses? He says the sin/viruses that are holding back the emergence of the Kingdom of God include analytical Bible study and the idea of individual salvation. But that seems to be a rather arbitrary choice based on his own idea of a good emergence. How does he know that it is not actually his own ideas that are holding it back? How does he know it is not his "post-liberal, post-conservative, emergent" ideas that are holding back the development of the tree rings into their next layer?

We might agree with him that there certainly is a sense in which the church's teaching methods must change to communicate to its own generation. For sure, each generation has the responsibility to reach its own. We can also see where the church of the previous generation (and every generation) has made tons of mistakes. But even a casual glance at the history of Christianity will show that his emergent ideas are always a step backward, not forward. The Emergent Movement is not the first to marginalize the Bible and de-emphasize individual salvation. The Roman Catholics did it in the Middle Ages and the European Liberals did it in the 1800s. Both times it nearly destroyed Christianity. Seeing the church as evolving into some new hybrid that emerges into the world has never made Christianity strong. It is when the church is different from the world that it is strongest and has the most to contribute. It is precisely when the church has emphasized Bible study (analytically) and salvation from hell and to heaven (personally) that it has been the strongest.

## The Bible and Bible Interpretation in the Emergent Movement

McLaren denies that anyone can understand the Bible (as he must do to maintain his distance from its clear message). Here is what he wrote on pages 147-148 of *A Generous Orthodoxy*:

*What happens when the “I” sees problems with the Bible? How do “I” know the Bible is always 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?” ...*

So McLaren appeals to the argument of agnosticism when it comes to understanding the Bible: namely, the idea that *truth cannot be known*. The problem, of course, is: if truth cannot be known, then that idea is either not true or it cannot be known either. This inability to interpret what a written text says is apparently limited, since he clearly assumes that pesky “I” does not get in the way of our understanding the books **he** has written.

McLaren’s method of interpretation is what he calls a “mystical/poetic approach” (*Ibid.*, p. 172). He considers “The Objective/Analytic” approach to be a “Reductionist Virus” (*The Church on the Other Side*, p. 193). Okay. So let’s use his method to interpret his book. He writes: “Suppose God has planned an extended future for the church? If so, our ministry dreams should receive the kind of planning appropriate to building a European cathedral ...” (*Ibid.*, p. 154).

Suppose I interpret that as: This is a metaphor saying “God” has planned an extended future for the church in heaven. I personally understand “church” to only be the Traditional Evangelicals and “a European cathedral” to be a poetic expression representing our mansions in heaven. So McLaren is suggesting that I and my Traditional Evangelical friends should ignore this earth and plan for a future in our heavenly cathedrals.

I am sure McLaren would respond to my interpretation of his statement with something like: “Don’t be ridiculous. That is not at all what I meant. I meant Christ may not return for many years, so it might be valuable to build beautiful structures to remember Him instead of the cheap things we Americans tend to build. If you read my whole statement, you would see that I am encouraging involvement in the world, not escaping from it.”

My response would be: “What! You mean we should take you **literally**? We should **analyze** your words so that we understand them as you, the author, intended them to be understood? You mean we should be **objective** in thinking about your words and maybe even check out the **context** to find out what you actually meant? Surely you are not suggesting that my **poetic/ mystical** understanding of your words led me away from your intended meaning or that your intended meaning is important?”

Anyway, you get the point. It is absurd to think that I cannot take a written document and figure out the basics of what it says. I may not understand everything, but that does not mean I cannot understand anything, or even most things. The different interpretations of different Christian denominations, which McLaren likes to point to, are a product of looking at denominations, not looking at the Bible. Most denominational differences are not because of different interpretations of the Bible but because of neglecting the Bible in favor of sacred traditions, visions, experiences, and an allegorical method of interpretation, like the poetic/mystical one McLaren promotes. The fact is, those who take the Bible literally (defined as simply taking the author at face value and looking for his intended meaning) will generally agree about most of the Bible most of the time. Take, for example, prophecy, homosexuality, evolution, salvation, and the nature of the church. The major disagreements are almost always between those who take the Bible seriously and literally and those who don’t. Actually, I could not find one single place where McLaren ever interprets, analyzes, or looks with authority at any biblical passage in any of his books.

McLaren says, “My regard for the Bible is higher than ever” (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 177). That sounds good, but what it really means is: My regard for the Bible is higher than ever because I don’t have to apply its clear message anymore (2 Timothy 3:16), I don’t have to feel guilty anymore (Hebrews 4:12), I don’t have to believe in a God of judgment (2 Corinthians 5:21) or a Jesus who is the only way to God (John 14:6). It means I can turn Jesus into a nice guy who goes around forgiving people, helping people, and ignoring their sin.

He says this about his method of interpretation: “This mystical/poetic approach takes special pains to remember that the Bible itself contains precious little expository prose. Rather it is story laced with parable, poem interwoven with vision, dream and opera” (*Ibid.*, p. 172). Here McLaren confuses literature style with method of interpretation. All these styles of literature can be, and must be, interpreted literally. Whatever style it is written in, we must determine the author’s intended meaning or it is just a bunch of gibberish. Poems are interpreted as poems, parables are interpreted as parables, and prose is interpreted as prose. Whatever the author intended is how it must be understood. McLaren’s “mystical/poetic approach” ignores what the

author said and makes everything subject to the interpreter. It is all like an abstract painting that just makes one think—about whatever one happens to think about. God, and the human author He inspired to write His Word without error (Matthew 5:18), are now irrelevant.

## Eight Basic Positions Emphasized by the Emergent Church Movement

### 1. **Universalism—All religions can be part of the Kingdom of God.**

McLaren writes:

The Christian faith, I am proposing, should become (in the name of Jesus Christ) a welcome friend to other religions of the world ... (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 287). Missional Christian faith asserts that Jesus did not come to make some people saved and others condemned. ... The idea that the Christian message is universally good news for Christians and non-Christians alike is, to some, unheard of, strange, and perhaps heretical. To me, it has become natural and obvious (*Ibid.*, p. 120). ... to love my neighbor ... in regard to my neighbor of another religion is to value ... the opportunity to learn all I can from his religion (*Ibid.*, p. 288).

### 2. **Ecology—Redemption includes rehabilitation of the natural world.**

McLaren has a chapter titled *Why I Am Green* (*Ibid.*, pp. 261-275). Most Emergents believe the Kingdom of God includes saving the natural world and that should also be part of our ministry. McLaren suggests,

Preach the gospel to all creation means to move away from the theology of salvation to the theology of creation ... (*Ibid.*, pp. 100-101). Perhaps our 'inward-turned, individual-salvation-oriented, un-adapted Christianity' is a colossal and tragic misunderstanding. ... In the Bible, *save* means 'rescue' or 'heal.' It emphatically does *not* automatically mean 'save from hell' or 'give eternal life after death' (*Ibid.*, p. 101). ... we are struck by the present hope of 'the kingdom of God' that is so central in Jesus' message. In this kingdom, Jesus said, sparrows matter. Lilies of the field matter. Yes, people matter even more, but it's not a matter of either/or; ... (*Ibid.*, p. 268).

### 3. **Feminism—Women are to be equal with men in all levels of Christian leadership.**

Emergents tend to deny the clear biblical prohibitions against women teaching and exercising authority over men (1 Corinthians 11:1-16; 1 Timothy 2:10-14; 3:1-2). They do this by appealing to culture and claiming that that was only true then and in that situation. We are to *emerge* beyond that. McLaren writes:

The exclusion of women and minorities from leadership hurts the church in many ways. ... we are subject to the unchecked biases of white male Christians ... and lose credibility with contemporary, educated people for whom racism and sexism are deeply offensive signs of backwardness and injustice (*The Church On The Other Side*, p. 132). I avoid the use of masculine pronouns for God because they can give the false impression to many people today that the Christian God is a male deity. ... The masculine biblical imagery of 'Father' and 'Son' also contributes to the patriarchalism or chauvinism that has too often characterized Christianity (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, pp. 82-83).

### 4. **Catholicism—The beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church fill some gaps in Protestantism.**

McLaren writes:

I realized how impoverished my Protestant faith was with its exclusively male focus. How much we missed by failing to see the beauty of the incarnation through Mary—a beauty that magnifies the value of women, erases the shame of Eve, ... (*Ibid.*, p. 257). [After sitting beneath a statue of Mary behind a Roman Catholic Church, he reports,] That day I became a little more Catholic and a little more catholic, too (*Ibid.*, p. 249).

### 5. **Community Salvation—Individual salvation is an emphasis on selfishness—the individual is to emerge into the church community, which is to emerge into the world community.**

The idea that man has a personal soul that needs saving McLaren characterizes as a

... ghost-in-a-machine model, where the body is the bigger machine and the soul is a little disassociated tenant, fluttering around in the machine like a tiny moth in a tin can. ... Individuals are wonderful, but they aren't the highest expression of humanity (*Ibid.*, p. 319). ... the Gospel starts with God's concern for the world, in which God creates a community called the church, comprised of persons who stop (or repent of) being 'part of the problem' and choose instead to join God as 'part of the solution'—thus simultaneously entering a mission and a community in which one is accepted by grace, through faith in Jesus (*Christianity*

Today, November 2004, p. 42). Election is not about who gets to go to heaven; election is about who God chooses to be part of his crisis-response team to bring healing to the world (*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40).

**6. Avoiding Absolute Truth Claims—Objective absolute truth cannot be known and that idea is offensive to our post-modern world.**

McLaren continues:

Making absolute truth claims—so important to evangelism in the modern era—becomes problematic in the post-modern context. Instead, ... we can focus on recruiting people who follow Jesus by faith (without claims of certainty or absolute knowledge) with the goal of being transformed and participating in the transformation of the world (*Ibid.*, p. 42).

He then warns against the use of "... adjectives like *absolute* and *objective* to modify the noun *truth*" (*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43).

**7. Missional Not Missionary—The truth of the Bible is not to determine what we do, it is to be determined as we go about our mission to heal the world.**

McLaren writes:

Just as it's nearly impossible to balance a bicycle when it's not moving, we're most likely to crash in our dealing with Scripture if we're not moving forward in our mission. Perhaps the best way to use Scripture is not to concentrate on our use of Scripture at all but rather to focus on our pursuit of mission (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 182). The Bible is a story, and just because it recounts (by standards of accuracy acceptable to its original audience) what happened, that doesn't mean it tells what should always happen or even what should have happened (*Ibid.*, p. 185).

**8. Liberalism—There is a de-emphasis on heaven, hell, and the infallible Bible, and an emphasis on following a nice, tolerant, "Jesus" into a better world.**

D. A. Carson writes:

When the horrible and frightening subject of hell comes up, the same sliding away from Scripture, without quite stating that Scripture is wrong, rises to the surface. ... Small wonder that numerous emerging leaders insist that the good news will focus on the importance of restoring one's lost relationship with God *rather than* salvation from God's judgment. Yet the Bible dares to speak of the wrath of God in terms every bit as personal as it speaks of the love of God. It is not surprising that McLaren is not faithful to what Scripture says on the cross of Christ, since he is not faithful to the nature of the judgment from which we must be saved. His reading of the Bible's story line turns out to be so selective that the uncomfortable bits are discretely dropped (*Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church*, p.168-169).

If we read about the old European Liberals who nearly destroyed Christianity in Europe and England, we feel we are reading the same things taught by the Emergent Movement of today. Here are some statements about two prominent Liberals of the 1800s and 1900s:

Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) rejected the Bible's three-storied universe (heaven, earth, and hell). ... For Bultmann ... to locate Jesus in a world of facts and "objectivity" would miss the present meaning of Christ, the object of faith. For Bultmann, Christian faith is ... in the story of Jesus Christ rather than on factual certainties. ... Such a faith replaces anxiety and guilt with love and confidence toward God, ... Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Danish philosopher and theologian, brought an emphasis on experience to theology that was later developed by neo-orthodox theologians. Kierkegaard denounced the cold orthodoxy of his native people who gave verbal assent to creeds and were automatically considered Christians because they were members of the state church. Kierkegaard taught that life is not believing doctrines but involves experience and commitment (Douglas, Comfort, and Mitchell, *Who's Who in Christian History*).

## Three General Evaluations

### 1. The Emergent View of Tolerance

The Emergent Movement is supposedly bathed in tolerance. The constant criticism of the Traditional Evangelicals of the modern era (roughly from the 1600s until a few decades ago) is about their intolerance, connected with the teaching of absolute and objective truth. But this has a built-in contradiction. First of all, to be tolerant assumes a position of

disagreement, which one chooses to tolerate. Second, to be truly tolerant, one must also be tolerant of intolerance. To quote D. A. Carson again:

Quite frankly, this [emergent view of tolerance] is intellectually incoherent. A capitalist may tolerate a Marxist and vice versa; a Muslim may tolerate a Christian and vice versa. But is it coherent to say, “I cannot say that there is anything amiss in your stance, and I tolerate you”? One has to disagree before one tolerates. ... Thus where they disagree with no one, postmoderns claim to be tolerant (which is incoherent), and in the one primary arena where they strongly disagree with others (namely, with moderns) they themselves prove intolerant.... (*Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, pp. 69-70).

## 2. The Emergent View of the World

Suppose we ignore all the details of the Emergent Movement and look at its most basic concept. It believes the church should be emerging out of the exclusive definition given to it by the modern analytical world of the Traditional Evangelicals and merging into the postmodern world of today. Their point is that we are to be part of the world while changing it from within. The Kingdom of God is something we bring about by bringing healing to the world.

This concept has some drastic problems. The Bible uses the “world” in reference to this present age. It consistently defines the “world” as the kingdom of Satan, not the Kingdom of God. Lewis Sperry Chaffer in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology* (pp. 76-90) expresses this idea as well as anyone I know. Here is some of what he says and some Scripture he uses:

The New Testament conception of *the world* is that it is opposed to God as worldliness is opposed to spirituality. ... The truth ... the New Testament invests that which the term represents with an antigod character.... The darkness of the *cosmos* is implied when Christ said, ... “My kingdom is not of this world” (*cosmos*—John 18:36); “The world [*cosmos*] by wisdom knew not God” (1 Cor. 1:21); ... “Keep himself unspotted from the world” (*cosmos*—James 1:27). ... The *cosmos* is a vast order of system that Satan has promoted, which conforms to his ideals, aims, and methods. It is civilization now functioning apart from God—a civilization in which none of its promoters really expect God to share, who assign to God no consideration in respect to their projects; nor do they ascribe any causativity to Him. This system embraces its godless governments, conflicts, armaments, jealousies, its education, culture, religions of morality, and pride. It is that sphere in which man lives. It is what he sees, what he employs. To the uncounted multitude it is all they ever know so long as they live on this earth.

Over against this revelation ... [John 3:16] ... is the instruction given to Christians relative to their love of the *cosmos*. It is written: “Love not the world [*cosmos*], neither the things that are in the world [*cosmos*]. If any man love the world [*cosmos*], the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world [*cosmos*], the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (*cosmos*—1 John 2:15-16). “... know ye not that the friendship of the world [*cosmos*] is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world [*cosmos*] is the enemy of God” (James 4:4). ... It is significant that of the 187 uses of *cosmos* in the New Testament, Christ employed the term more than all others together. ...

It [the *cosmos*] is to be judged and destroyed completely. No attempt will be made to salvage anything out of it when its day of demolition arrives. ... In like manner, the believer is said to have been delivered from the present evil age (Gal. 1:4) and “delivered ... from the power of darkness” (Col. 1:13), and is not to be conformed to this age (Rom. 12:2). ... Most assuredly, then, that which God now tolerates for wise purposes is doomed to complete destruction. This is directly asserted: “For the fashion of this world [*cosmos*] passeth away” (1 Cor. 7:31); “And the world [*cosmos*] passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John 2:17); “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). [All emphases his.]

## 3. The Emergent View of The Kingdom of God

One other thought bears mention before we close this evaluation. A basic assumption of the Emergent Church Movement (and many churches today) is that **we** are to bring in the Kingdom of God on earth. Often, for example, a portion of the Lord’s Prayer is quoted: *Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10). This is taken as a command to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.



But one obvious fact is overlooked. This is a recommended (or sample) prayer we are to request of God. It is something we are supposed to ask God to do, not something God is asking us to do. Through His prophets, God sometimes told His people what He would do in order to demonstrate His sovereignty. But His point was never that **they** were to do what **He** was going to do. As a matter of fact, He told them He would often use Gentiles, bad kings, unbelievers, and even demons and the Antichrist to bring about what He was doing. On the other hand, He gave them specific commands concerning what **they** were to. Sometimes, He would use their obedience to bring about what He was doing, but the two were not the same, and at no time were God's people to take it upon themselves to do what God was doing.

For example, Noah simply obeyed God and built an ark. He did not attempt to do what God was doing or he would have formed an army (or something) to wipe out the evil people of the antediluvian world. Abraham simply moved to the land God said He would give him. He did not attempt to drive all the other people out of it. The prophets obeyed God and warned the Old Testament Israelites of God's impending judgment. They did not attempt to do what God was doing to bring about that judgment. Conversely, Jonah refused to go to Nineveh because he would rather be involved in what God was going to do (defeat the Assyrians) than what God told him to do (prophesy in Nineveh, the capitol city of the Assyrians).

Jesus told Peter, *upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it* (Matthew 6:18). Jesus announced to Peter what He was going to do, but He certainly did not suggest that we, or Peter, should do that. He did **not** say, "upon this rock I expect **you** to build My church." What He expects us to do is *make disciples of all the nations* (Matthew 28:18-29), *entrust these [things] to faithful men who will be able to teach others also* (2 Timothy 2:2), *do all things for the sake of the gospel* (1 Corinthians 9:23), be His witnesses *to the remotest part of the earth* (Acts 1:8), and love: one another (John 15:12), our neighbors (Luke 10:25-37), and our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Building His Kingdom is not something God ever suggested we believers should do.