

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 1: An Overview***

by *Scott Diekmann*

[SoundWitness.org](http://SoundWitness.org)

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Jump to: [Part\\_2](#) | [Part\\_3](#) | [Part\\_4](#) | [Part\\_5](#) | [Part\\_6](#) | [Part\\_7](#) | [Part\\_8](#)

Several people asked me what I knew about the Emerging Church, and I found it difficult to give a definitive answer. Originally, my knowledge of the Emerging Church was fairly limited, but my inquisitiveness caused me to delve further. What I discovered after digging deeper was at times refreshing, at times provocative, and at times maddening. Some of what I read was at best undiscerning, and at worst, heretical. Finding quotes such as “Is the Bible the best God can do?”<sup>1</sup> and “The point of the cross isn’t forgiveness,”<sup>2</sup> I felt I had to speak out on this topic. You are invited to read along as the story of the Emerging Church unfolds.

In an ABC News Nightline report on the Emerging Church, Host Martin Bashir begins the show with a bit of journalistic sensationalism by stating “...a brand new breed of church is pushing the envelope in a whole new way.”<sup>3</sup> Correspondent Laura Marquez then goes on to report on several Emerging Churches, accenting rock music, a setting more resembling a coffee house than a church, an Advent wreath made out of a tire, and a dog accompanying its owner to Communion. While these attributes may be descriptive of some Emerging Churches, they are more “novelty” than helpful insight. In this 8-part article, I will attempt to separate the fluff from the fact, emphasizing what it is the Emerging Church is saying about itself, and comparing that conversation with Scripture to determine if what is being said is sound.

The Emerging Church, also called the Emergent Church, had its start in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It began in recognition of a need to witness to postmodern people, a group that is sometimes difficult to connect with. To understand the Emerging Church and its witness, a prior exploration of modernism and postmodernism will be helpful.

Modernism’s beginning has been variously reported from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> A symbolic inauguration of the age of modernism occurred in 1793 when the “Goddess of Reason” was enthroned in the Cathedral of Notre Dame during the French Revolution, profaning the Cathedral and proclaiming reason as the

new “god.” Man was now master of his universe. For many, scientific query, linear thinking, and a belief in the supremacy of man erased the need for a superstitious or spiritual explanation for the workings of the natural world. An unshakeable faith in mankind’s ability, which at times led to arrogance, permeated the era. This ascendant worldview had its influence on theology as well. Revelation’s role as a source of truth was supplanted by reason in some liberal circles.

In reaction to modernism and its individuality, postmodernism has gradually developed.<sup>5</sup> The modern dream has not panned out. Science and reason have not made our lives less complicated, or answered all of life’s questions. The truths of modernism have failed to satisfy, and disillusionment has led to a rejection of truth in general. A simplistic definition of postmodernism would thus be a rejection of all-encompassing truth claims (called *metanarratives*). To quote one theologian:

The postmodernists reject both the Christian and modernist approaches to the question of truth. According to postmodern theory, truth is not universal, is not objective or absolute, and cannot be determined by a commonly accepted method. Instead, postmodernists argue that truth is socially constructed, plural, and inaccessible to universal reason.

What has been understood and affirmed as truth, argue the postmodernists, is nothing more than a convenient structure of thought intended to oppress the powerless. Truth is not universal, for every culture establishes its own truth. Truth is not objectively real, for all truth is merely constructed—as Rorty stated, truth is *made*, not *found*.<sup>6</sup>

Tagging along with the postmodern dismissal of universal truth is the concept of *deconstruction*. The dictionary definition of deconstruction is as follows:

A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings: “In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, ‘virtual texts’ constructed by readers in their search for meaning” (Rebecca Goldstein).<sup>7</sup>

All broad, sweeping claims of truth are viewed with suspicion, and are often considered a means by which the author or those in power exercise control over others. Whether you are referring to a newspaper article, a speech, a religion, a folk tale, a corporate mission statement, or a TV sitcom, they all need to be deconstructed to root out their hidden meaning and agenda. This last statement seems a bit “over the top,” but is a common facet of postmodern thought. Carried to the extreme, deconstructionists “‘argue that all writing is reducible to an arbitrary sequence of linguistic signs or words whose meanings have no relationship to the author’s intention or to the world outside the text.’ NEWSWEEK, 6/22/81.”<sup>8, 9</sup>

Since, according to postmodernists, communication is considered problematic at best due to the vagaries of human language and the differing world views and cultures of the speaker and the listener, deconstruction is made to appear acceptable. If you can never know the exact meaning of what someone has said, why not deconstruct it and assign it a meaning that works for you and your group! Deconstruction becomes an exercise in political correctness or conformation within the context of your own affinity group.<sup>10</sup>

So how does all of this tie in with the topic at hand, the Emerging Church? First, many of those whom the Emerging Church attracts to one degree or another share a postmodern worldview. But at the same time, the majority of them are not hard-core postmodernists. The average Jane or Joe has never heard of deconstruction. They would likely not say that truth is unknowable, although they may seriously question truth claims, and share other postmodern ideals. Secondly, since Emerging Church leaders are attempting to reach out to “postmoderns,” their approach to the entire Emerging discussion is tailor-made to fit the postmodern worldview. Not just a few of those Emerging Church leaders have been greatly influenced by the same postmodern ideals, both in their practice and in their beliefs. It is in this area of practice and beliefs that the ensuing parts of this article will concentrate, but for now a more thorough description of the Emerging Church will be offered, without critique, often using their own words.

### **The Emerging Church - What's Emerging?**

The Emerging Church is a loosely woven fabric of individuals and communities (churches) of all sorts of beliefs, that stretches worldwide.<sup>11</sup> The name “Emerging Church” is something of a misnomer, since the “church” is not a denomination or group of individuals with one set doctrine or a common set of beliefs, and there is therefore no one spokesperson for the Emerging Church. Many of them like to call themselves a “conversation,” or a “movement.” Some of those in the conversation are individuals from what I’ll refer to as the “mainline” denominational churches that merely want to use Emerging ideas to “tweak” their worship services or start a satellite church in order to retain and attract younger members. Others are drawn to the more “relational” and “missional” aspects of the Emerging Church as opposed to a doctrinal stance, and may or may not be new Christians. Some are attracted to the “novelty” aspect, as depicted on Nightline (although not all Emerging Churches fit that description). Still others reject the practices and/or theology of the mainline church and are seeking to transform or completely “reimagine” the church. Some of the leaders in the Emerging Church are former pastors from conservative church bodies who have “liberated” themselves from those strictures.

To a certain extent, the metaphor “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” applies here. The Emerging conversation is so broad and varied that it is difficult to assess how many within the movement are mainline types, how many are hard-core postmodernists, and how many people fall in-between. Unfortunately, it’s usually the more aberrant and sensationalist types of people, places, and events that make the headlines, and that

seems to be the case with the Emerging Church as well. While there are conservative Emergents who are out there speaking and writing, such as Pastor Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill, the Emergents towards the other end of the spectrum seem to get more of the attention, such as Brian McLaren and Tony Jones. It will therefore necessarily be towards the “liberal” end of the Emerging spectrum that I will concentrate in this article, because that is where heterodox doctrinal issues arise.<sup>12</sup> The squeaky wheel gets the grease. For now though, I’ll present a composite description of what might be considered an “average” postmodern Emerging Church profile.

The Emerging conversation often revolves around the desire to change the church to make it more holistic, communal, and culturally relevant to a postmodern paradigm:

The emerging church phenomenon is exploring fresh ways to revamp and recontextualize the gospel message to postmodern people.<sup>13</sup>

The emerging church is a quest for a more integrated and whole life of faith. There is a bit of theological questioning going on, focusing more on kingdom theology, the inner life, friendship/community, justice, earth keeping, inclusivity, and inspirational leadership. In addition, the arts are in a renaissance, as are the classical spiritual disciplines. Overall, it is a quest for a holistic spirituality.<sup>14</sup>

...offering the things that postmodern people are hungering for: identity, meaning, particularity, belonging, community, spirituality and the good news of salvation!<sup>15</sup>

There is a sentiment that the mainline churches are languishing in the postmodern world:

But we have run out of gas with modern Christianity. I think it’s pretty much done all it can do and said all it can say.<sup>16</sup>

Due to its cultural entrenchment, the church no longer relates to the surrounding culture, hence its increasing marginalization and perceived irrelevance.<sup>17</sup>

...the mortar-happy church of the last half of the 20th century is ill-poised to face the promises and perils of the future.<sup>18</sup>

There is a move away from modernism:

We have moved from the modern to the postmodern/emerging; from the linear/absolute to the non-linear/subjective; from science/evidence to spirit/feelings; from intellect/truth to experience/real; from order/dictated to

chaos/reality.<sup>19</sup>

And a move away from doctrine:

The eclectic approach of the emerging church is also in sync with the wider culture's approach to spirituality, which has become divorced from institutional religion and the control of dogma.<sup>20</sup>

They emphasize a narrative approach to theology:

The individual stories of each member and the collective story of the faith community are seen in the context of God's story as it unfolds throughout Scripture. Theology becomes a dynamic, unfolding reflection of God's dealings with people in the changing circumstances of life.<sup>21</sup>

I am becoming more and more convinced that the missional/incarnational church will not gain any traction unless we learn to read the Bible and the Christian story in a new way. In short, narrative theology has to replace systematic theology as the primary mode of thinking about Christian faith.<sup>22</sup>

"Church" as a Sunday morning event is de-emphasized in favor of a more missional definition of "church":

They feel they don't have a context for going to church because they are "being church."<sup>23</sup>

Evangelism is not seen as a program but as a communal living out of the gospel in everyday routines.<sup>24</sup>

Being "missional" simply means being outward and others-focused, with the goal of expressing and sharing the love of Jesus. The church was not created for itself to remain inward-focused, but actually created to worship God and to spread His love to others. We each were created for a missional purpose. Therefore, we won't have a "missions department" because the whole church itself is a mission. Jesus clearly told the church to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). For us today, this command is not exclusive to overseas missions alone (which we will support wholeheartedly since global missions is extremely important) but is foremost to be lived out in our own communities, families, and day to day lives.<sup>25</sup>

I no longer believe in evangelism. To be postevangelism is to live our lives in Christ without a strategy but with the compassion and the servant posture of Jesus Christ. We do not do evangelism or have a mission. The Holy Spirit is the evangelist, and the mission belongs to God. What we do is simply live

our lives publicly as a community in the way of Jesus Christ, and when people inquire as to why we live this way, we share with them an account of the hope within us.<sup>26</sup>

Community is a place for spiritual development:

The standard of success will be based on “Are you in a community?” versus “Are you doing x, y, and z so that you will grow closer to God?” While personal disciplines are important, they grow meaningless apart from a team of spiritual supporters.<sup>27</sup>

Community: We believe that salvation brings people together as a reflection of a triune God: Father, Son and Spirit. Saved from sin by faith through grace, the people of God are able to live in unity as was intended by God in the beginning.<sup>28</sup>

I am a part of a community, and I have accepted a view of the world from them.<sup>29</sup>

“I truly believe that community is where real spiritual formation happens. Most people come to faith not by an isolated effort but through living day by day with people of faith such as their families or friends.”<sup>30</sup>

There is an emphasis on being more “genuine,” which means avoiding insincerity or phoniness:

Be Transparent - Be ready to express your humanity and accept your flaws. We are a people who desire to “become” and not live in “one is.” We desire growth and learning, not dogma and doctrine. Transparency means that there are no secretes [sic] in the Postmodern world.<sup>31</sup>

They seek to be inclusive:

“We are very Christocentric, which means that while we recognize God’s presence in other religions and in people of no faith, we still see Jesus as the most perfect revelation of God and therefore the surest route to God.”<sup>32</sup>

They include both Christians and non-Christians in the same groups. This avoidance of differentiation is another common characteristic of emerging churches. They do not want to create “us” and “them” distinctions, which they feel would be both discriminatory and destructive of group participation.<sup>33</sup>

And they are experiential:

we [*sic*] expect that right-brained expressions will increase (music, poetry, art, drama) as left-brained expressions (apologetics, proposition, reason) learn how to share the stage. The whole person is engaged, and worship becomes multi-sensory: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are utilized to a greater degree, not to tantalize, but to engage, focus, inspire, communicate and express.<sup>34</sup>

While no Emerging Church will necessarily display all of the above characteristics, this gives us a good starting point. In Part 2, we will begin to examine specific beliefs of the Emerging Church. The topic of our discussion will be the Bible, and how some elements of the Emerging Church have “mistreated” Holy Scripture.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at: <http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.  
The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 44.
2. Bell, 108.
3. “Faith Matters,” Nightline, narr. Laura Marquez, ABC, 13 Jan 2006, ABC News Video, 03 Mar 2007 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=1505555>>.
4. Some Emergent authors place Modernism’s beginning as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. I believe part of their motivation for an earlier time line is to link the Reformation with modernism, thereby discrediting the theology and doctrinal orientation of the Reformation. This attempt would be an example of *deconstruction*. While there are examples of rationalism overriding Scripture during the Reformation, they are limited. During the modern era, many Lutheran theologians (of whom I’m most familiar) railed against modernism.
5. Let me remind the reader that an Emerging Church “member” is not necessarily a postmodernist.
6. Albert Mohler Jr., “Ministry is Stranger Than it Used to Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism,” www.AlbertMohler.com, 28 Feb 2007 <[http://www.albertmohler.com/article\\_read.php?cid=2](http://www.albertmohler.com/article_read.php?cid=2)>.
7. “deconstruction,” The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, Dictionary.com, 31 Jan 2007 <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/deconstruction>>.
8. Bill Crouse, “Deconstructionism: The Postmodern Cult of Hermes,” Christian Information Ministries, 28 Feb 2007 <<http://www.christianinformation.org/article.asp?artID=73>>.
9. If deconstructionists believe their own philosophy, why do they bother writing it down, since no one would be able to understand what they mean? Postmodern people have no problem with these types of contradictions and ambiguities. With

the abandonment of Truth with a capital “T,” and the arrival of truth that is socially constructed, ambiguities are to be expected. Your truth may not be the same as my truth - they may contradict, but that’s O.K. While a modernist might refer to *the law of noncontradiction* in this situation, or an apologist might refer to *suspension of disbelief*, a postmodernist will happily accept the contradiction.

10. What follows is a narrative on deconstruction with a more attractive spin on it from Emergent blogger Bob Robinson: “If postmodernity is right that all metanarratives are social constructions, then deconstruction is the only right thing to do to them—in order to understand how those local communities built these concepts in the first place. We need not fear postmodern deconstruction—for it is beneficial because it tears down what Bruce Benson calls the ‘Graven Ideologies’ of modernity. Once our modern idols have been destroyed, we Christians will be capable of living a more pure Christian faith.”

Bob Robinson, “I’m Situated in a Local Community, and That’s Okay!”, Vanguard Church, 28 Feb 2007 <<http://vanguardchurch.blogspot.com/2005/09/im-situated-in-local-communityand.html>>.

11. Justin Taylor remarks: “The emerging church movement is not a North American phenomenon only. There are thousands of emerging Christians in Western Europe and the South Pacific—and to a lesser extent, there is development in Asia, Africa, and South America.”

Justin Taylor, “What Is the Emerging Church Movement? Part 4,” Between Two Worlds: A Mix of Theology, Philosophy, Politics, and Culture, 28 Feb 2007 <[http://theologica.blogspot.com/2005/11/what-is-emerging-church-mo\\_113226673241032906.html](http://theologica.blogspot.com/2005/11/what-is-emerging-church-mo_113226673241032906.html)>.

12. Pastor Mark Driscoll, in his article “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” groups the Emerging Church into three categories, the most liberal of which he calls “Revisionists.” He makes a distinction between the terms “Emerging” and “Emergent,” labeling those who are “theologically liberal” “Emergent,” and the other two groups “Emerging.” His Emergent group apparently includes those leaders who are associated with Emergent Village (such as Brian McLaren and Tony Jones). I think it’s safe to say that his “Emergent” group would be included in my “squeaking wheel” group, although they aren’t necessarily identical, and no distinction is made between the two terms in this article. There are many others in the Emerging Church who are theologically liberal who aren’t associated with Emergent Village, but also fall into the “squeaking wheel” group.

Mark Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” Criswell Theological Review, 3.2, Spring 2006, 87-93, 10 Mar 2007 <<http://criswell.wordpress.com/files/2006/03/3.2%20APastoralPerspectiveontheEmergentChurch%5BDriscoll%5D.PDF>>.

13. Frank Viola, “Will the Emerging Church Fully Emerge?,” EmergingChurch.info, 22 Mar 2007 <<http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/frankviola/index.htm>>.

14. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 42; quoting Mark Scandrette of ReIMAGINE! in San Francisco.

15. “Survivor for Lutherans,” emergingchurch.org, 14 Jan 2006 <<http://www.emergingchurch.org/lutheransurvivor~ns4.html>>. This site is currently disabled, as of 28 Feb 2007.

16. Eric Hurtgen, "There's A Bigger Story: Brian McLaren [sic]," RelevantMagazine.com, 28 Feb 2007 <[http://www.relevantmagazine.com/beta/god\\_article.php?id=1012](http://www.relevantmagazine.com/beta/god_article.php?id=1012)>.
17. Gibbs and Bolger, 18.
18. Leonard Sweet, interview with Tamara Cissna, "'God Sent a Person, Not a Proposition.': A Conversation With Len Sweet," George Fox Journal Online, 1.3, Fall 2005, 28 Feb 2007 <<http://www.georgefox.edu/journalonline/archives/fall05/emerging.html>>.
19. John O'Keefe, "Quantum Servanthood: knowing how to lead in chaos;" formerly available at ginkworld.net.
20. Gibbs and Bolger, 222.
21. Gibbs and Bolger, 164.
22. Benjamin Sternke, "Narrative theology and the missional church," ben's blog, 01 Mar 2007 <[http://benjaminsternke.typepad.com/benjaminsternke/2006/09/narrative\\_theol.html](http://benjaminsternke.typepad.com/benjaminsternke/2006/09/narrative_theol.html)>.
23. Gibbs and Bolger, 100
24. Gibbs and Bolger, 108
25. "about vintage faith church" page, Vintage Faith Church, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://vintagechurch.org/about/vision/missional>>.
26. Gibbs and Bolger, 135; quoting Karen Ward of Church of the Apostles in Seattle.
27. Chad Hall, "Leader's Insight: NASCAR and the Emerging Culture," LeadershipJournal.net, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2005/cln51017.html>>.
28. "What We Believe" page, ecclesia, 01 Mar 2007 <[http://www.ecclesiahouston.org/index\\_flash.html](http://www.ecclesiahouston.org/index_flash.html)>.
29. Neil Livingstone, "How can you trust the Bible?" 12, 01 Mar 2007 <[http://chitv.org/ourprograms/Adult%20Classes/The%20Story/howcanyoutrustthebible\[1\].pdf](http://chitv.org/ourprograms/Adult%20Classes/The%20Story/howcanyoutrustthebible[1].pdf)>.
30. Doug Pagitt, Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.
31. John O'Keefe, "church xp, the upgrade - part one, the introduction;" formerly available at ginkworld.net.
32. Gibbs and Bolger, 123; quoting Simon Hall of Revive in Leeds, U.K.
33. Gibbs and Bolger, 109.
34. Paul Soupiset, "Toward an Emergent Church Values Set III: Re-centered, multi-sensory Worship," soupablog, 04 Mar 2007 <[http://soupiset.typepad.com/soupablog/2004/06/toward\\_an\\_emerg\\_3.html](http://soupiset.typepad.com/soupablog/2004/06/toward_an_emerg_3.html)>.

***Sola Scriptura   •   Sola Gratia   •   Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 2: The Bible, One Voice Among Many***

*by Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Brian McLaren, the articulate, generally soft-spoken, most widely recognized leader in the Emerging Church states in his book [The Church on the Other Side](#):

“...if we have a new world, we will need a new church. We won’t need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new Spirit, but a new spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new Christian.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout history, when Christians developed a framework for their theology, they started with the Bible. In pre-modern times, and often in modern times, the Bible was viewed as revelation, and theology was based solely on God’s revelation to man as found in the Bible. Because of the influence of modernism, theology has at times been “warped” due to man’s use of rationalism (the principle or habit of accepting reason as the supreme authority in matters of opinion, belief, or conduct<sup>2</sup>) to determine truth. The text of the Bible became subservient to man rather than the other way around.

With the advent of postmodernism, questions are being asked in the Emerging Church regarding the relationship between the Bible and truth. To understand the Emerging Church’s view(s) of Scripture and its relationship to truth, you must understand their concept of the interplay between community, story, and inspiration.

### **The Importance of Community in the Emerging Church**

There are two sides to the Emerging Church’s idea of community, one a goal-oriented side, and one a conceptual side.

Brian McLaren offers us this somewhat utopian ideal of the goal-oriented side of an Emerging community:

But Jesus presents us with a dream (embodied in the group image “kingdom

of God”) that is irreducibly communal, familial, and social. It is not just a dream of more and better individual Christians standing like isolated statues in a museum. It is a dream of a community vibrant with life, pulsating with forgiveness, loud with celebration, fruitful in mission.<sup>3</sup>

Brian’s view of the goal-oriented side of the Emerging community is shared by most in the Emerging Church. There is a large emphasis on community being something more, or other than, a group of believers that shows up for church each Sunday. They promote community, genuineness, and mission, in the sense that they spend less time on church meetings and potlucks and more time living out their faith in the world. Some have taken their message, and their churches, to the streets of the inner city. This is certainly a worthy goal.<sup>4</sup>

Our beliefs are intended to foster a way of life that in turn sends us into the world to serve God and our neighbors, so that God’s will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, and so that God’s kingdom may come.<sup>5</sup>

The conceptual side of the Emerging Church community emphasizes a communal derivation of truth. As I discussed briefly in Part 1, postmodernists believe that truth is socially constructed. True meaning can only be derived within the context of a group. To quote Gibbs and Bolger from their book Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures,<sup>6</sup> the book Brian McLaren calls “...by far the best introduction to the whole phenomenon”<sup>7</sup>:

One cannot understand the truths of Christianity as an outside observer. One needs first to experience the embodied truth of the community.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Bob Wright, quoting from Hauerwas and Willimon, states that Emerging Church advocates:

...believe it is a “mistake to think we can give...arguments to people who are ‘inside’ their own language...We encourage them to ‘come and see’ the truth of our story by ‘trying on’ the Christian way of life—by learning how we, members of the Christian community live, talk, and behave. That is, by becoming an insider in our community, they can learn to see the truth of our faith, even though they never could know its veracity from the outside.”<sup>9</sup>

Gibbs and Bolger comment:

It is not that postmodern people do not want truth per se, but whose truth? Often the one proposing, or more often imposing, “truth” is a person in power. Why trust that person? Instead, a better way to truth, in their view, is to hear the many stories and to discern accordingly, within the context of community.<sup>10</sup>

Notice in these quotes that the conceptual aspect of the Emerging community has taken on the identity of the postmodern worldview.

Complementing the idea of a community-derived truth is the neo-orthodox idea that the Holy Spirit can work without means. This type of thought, propounded by such postmodern Emergent theologians as Stanley Grenz and John Franke, is an unscriptural concept. Separating the Holy Spirit from the Scriptures allows for a culturally established theology, and ultimately, multiple sets of “truth.” To quote John Franke:

A nonfoundationalist approach to theology seeks to respond positively and appropriately to the situatedness of all human thought and therefore to embrace a principled theological pluralism. It also attempts to affirm that the ultimate authority in the church is not a particular source, be it Scripture, tradition, or culture but only the living God. Therefore, if we must speak of “foundations” for the Christian faith and its theological enterprise, then we must speak only of the triune God who is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through Scripture, the church, and even the world, albeit always in accordance with the normative witness to divine self-disclosure contained in Scripture.<sup>11, 12</sup>

You can't have it both ways. Either define God based on the world or define God based on Scripture. There is no such thing as Mr. Franke's “principled theological pluralism.” There *is* such a thing as a god disclosed only through the world: it's called *idolatry*. Franke also speaks of “the voice of the Spirit speaking through culture,” “further light,” “the speaking of the Spirit is not bound up solely with the supposed ‘original intention’ of the author,” and “an open and flexible theology that is in keeping with the local and contextual character of human knowledge while remaining thoroughly and distinctly Christian.” In other words, according to this neo-orthodox view, the Holy Spirit uses not only Scripture, but also the Church and even culture to express different messages to various cultural sub-groups. According to Franke, “such a theology is the product of the reflection of the Christian community in its local expressions.”

This neo-orthodox view is also reflected in the words of Emerging Church leader Tony Jones:

the beauty of the Spirit controlling the text is that it can, indeed, have different meanings in different times... and that the Spirit can use our own experiences and viewpoints to enlighten us to the meaning of the Word.<sup>13</sup>

Brian McLaren has similar thoughts:

In each case, from the many layers and facets of the Christ-centered gospel, new resources are drawn, and so the message itself changes because the

message changes its context, which is to say that the message itself changes by addressing new situations and problems, opportunities in new ways...<sup>14</sup>

According to these Emerging Church leaders, the “message” of Jesus Christ can change if the truth of Jesus Christ is received in “polyphonic fashion” from multiple sources. I agree with Franke, we *must* “speak of ‘foundations’” for the Christian enterprise, but there is only *one* foundation:

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

Ephesians 2:20

The Holy Spirit speaks through no other voice than that of Scripture. As long as, and to the extent that, the Emerging Church relies on a foundation other than the sole foundation of Scripture, theirs will be an unstable house. Truth for them has become “the reflection of the Christian community in its local expressions,” and can only be affirmed within the context of the group, and that truth is often found through “story.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Importance of Story in the Emerging Church**

To help understand the importance of story, or narrative, in the Emerging Church, I'll quote Emerging Church enthusiast Ben Sterneke:

Christianity is first and foremost a story. It is a history. It is not a set of "timeless truths" or abstract doctrines that we tap into from week to week.<sup>16</sup> It isn't a static system of truth, it's a dynamic story, an unfinished narrative that we live within, and a narrative that we have a part in working out, we help to move the story toward its conclusion.

When Christianity is conceived as merely "timeless truths", the goal becomes "getting to heaven when I die", and then we're left with not much to do until death.... But Christianity isn't primarily about going to Heaven, it's about seeing Heaven come to Earth. Unless Christianity is understood as an unfinished drama, there will be no inherent impetus for mission. But when Christianity is seen as a story, mission makes perfect sense; working out our salvation, learning to love more completely, stewarding the environment, and ridding ourselves of sin are natural out-workings of narrative theology. If we understand Christianity as a story, and read the Bible like the story it is, we realize that the story is going somewhere. And we are part of that story, we have a part to play in moving the story towards its conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

More will be said about the missional aspects of the Emerging Church in Part 6, but for now, Emerging Church leader John O'Keefe will give his “take” on narrative:

The narrative helps define who we are and what we do - it is a core part of

our DNA. No matter the story, no matter the ending, truth is in the narrative. All story is valid, all story, both individual and group, can add to the collective of the community. When we see life as simply a collection of story, we start to understand both our humanity and God's divinity. The narrative allows for creative, adaptable, nonlinear thinking with group input and an interactivity based on transparency and a living worldview.<sup>18, 19</sup>

Culture is narrative: All culture is narrative in nature, all culture. All culture express' [*sic*] itself with words, symbols, and images. When Jesus spoke in parables he did so to express a cultural understanding of the story. He expressed his culture, via the narrative. When we understand that narrative is essential, and creative narratives motivates we can move along in the process.<sup>20</sup>

So truth for many in the Emerging conversation is found through community within the context of a culturally embedded story. That story is found in the stories of the Bible, interpreted by the reader's own cultural settings, and the stories of the reader's own lives. The concept of propositional truth is generally scorned.<sup>21, 22</sup> "The Bible is not a database of pithy proof texts."<sup>23</sup> "As we had said before, we cannot simply 'go to the book'. Truth cannot properly reside as a mere proposition on a page. Truth lives in persons and relationship."<sup>24</sup>

That last quote, "we cannot simply 'go to the book,'" causes many Christians to raise a questioning eyebrow. If community and story determine truth, where does the Bible fit in? It is that question that will be explored next.

### **The Emerging Church's View of the Bible as it Relates to God's Word**

In Brian McLaren's book The Last Word and the Word After That, through his character Dan Poole, he states "I believe that the Word of God is inerrant...."<sup>25</sup> That sounds great - totally in keeping with what Scripture teaches. He then goes on to say in the continuation of the sentence, "...*but* I do not believe that the Bible is absolutely equivalent to the phrase 'the Word of God' as used in the bible." (my emphasis) Continuing two sentences later he says:

"I would prefer to use the term inherency to describe my view of Scripture: God's inerrant Word is inherent in the Bible, which makes it an irreplaceable, essential treasure for the church, deserving our wholehearted study and respect..."

I respect my boss. I respect the president. The Bible I *revere*. It doesn't *contain* the Word of God, it *is* the Word of God. If the Word of God is only inherent in the Bible, where is the list which shows us which part of it is actually the Word of God, and which

part I can ignore or throw out? Since God didn't provide such a list (because *all of the Bible is the inerrant Word of God*), that means the person making the statement must provide the list, placing herself or himself on God's throne. That person has usurped God's authority, making himself God, similar to the crowning of the Goddess of Reason in the Cathedral of Notre Dame which was discussed in Part 1. This type of reasoning leads to comments such as this one by Emerging author Neil Livingstone: "The book is not enough. Authority comes when people who have wisdom and love hold forth the words of the book to the world."<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, an orthodox outlook on Scripture is reflected by these two authors:

Biblical inerrancy and dogmatic authority are the same issue. Does God speak? Can His truth be known? Can His truth be stated in words which are understandable and binding upon the conscience? If not, there can be no gospel at all, for the gospel must be a promise with the authority of God Himself, or it loses its character completely.<sup>27</sup>

Every theologian should be able to see that we are here confronted with an aut-aut. Either we accept Scripture as God's own Word and, emphasizing it as the sole source and norm of theology, teach *doctrinam divinam*, or we deny that Scripture is God's infallible Word, distinguish in it between truth and error, and teach, in God's Church, the "visions of our own heart," the *doctrina humana* of our Ego. The divine authority which we take away from Scripture we necessarily assign to our own human mind. We are adrift on the sea of subjectivism. Human opinion occupies the rostrum in the Church. Theology is no longer theocentric [focused on God], but has become anthropocentric [focused on man].<sup>28</sup>

Rejection of God's Word as God's Word is certainly not limited to the Emerging Church, being found in many parts of the mainline church as well, but it is rampant in the "squeaking wheel" portion of the Emerging Church.

To further fog the Scriptural battlefield, some in the Emerging Church claim that the Bible was written by men only, not by God. Rob Bell, an Emerging Church leader, opines in his book *Velvet Elvis*: "Now I think the Bible is the most amazing, beautiful, deep, inspired, engaging collection of writings ever." Often, when theologians have referred to the Bible as "inspired," they meant that while the apostles and prophets wrote the words down, in their own unique styles, they were guided by the Holy Spirit, so that *every word they wrote was exactly as God wanted it*. They were writing *the words of God – verbal inspiration*.<sup>29</sup> Rob Bell's definition of "inspiration," however, seems to have undergone a "radical" redefinition,<sup>30</sup> as illustrated in this interview of Bell and his wife:

...they found themselves increasingly uncomfortable with church. "Life in the church had become so small," Kristen says. "It had worked for me for a long time. Then it stopped working."<sup>31</sup> The Bells started questioning their

assumptions about the Bible itself– “discovering the Bible as a human product,” as Rob puts it, rather than the product of divine fiat. “The Bible is still in the center for us,” Rob says, “but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.”

“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>32</sup>

No wonder it’s in color! Their “discovery” has liberated them from the authority of the Bible! Now they can rewrite Scripture and doctrine into whatever color they want – whatever works. The old Adam does cartwheels and handsprings when he hears this kind of pastoral philandering. Human sinful nature, the old Adam, needs to be drowned daily, not to be spoon fed false doctrine.

Rob’s Scriptural infidelity leads him to make statements such as these:

And the more people insist that they are just taking the Bible for what it says, the more skeptical I get.

Which for me raises one huge question: Is the Bible the best God can do?<sup>33</sup>

This [the early church’s determination of the 66 books as the canon of Scripture] is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true.<sup>34</sup>

Others in the Emerging conversation also share Rob Bell’s human authorship perspective. Brian McLaren, while claiming the Bible is inspired by God, at the same time says that “...Scripture is something God has ‘let be,’ and so it is at once God’s creation and the creation of the dozens of people and communities and cultures who produced it.”<sup>35</sup>

Emergent author Neil Livingstone has this to say:

This, then, is how he [God] has produced the Bible. He works in people’s lives, and then sets them to talking and writing about it. When the people write down their passions, visions, call to holy life, and their interpretations of how God is working in history, and when the believing community around them says “Yes. This is what God is saying to us”, then God is pleased. He is succeeding...

If God had simply dropped a book from heaven into our laps, or used his human creatures as dictation devices, can you see how that would have undermined his whole purpose in speaking to us? But what we see in the Bible is itself an example of the outworking of God’s purposes. It’s done by people in true partnership with the illuminating Spirit of God...

The God of the Bible is so excited about creating a common life with his human creatures that he went much farther than writing a book with them.... So, the God of the Bible is the kind of God who would hand us a book that is written by humans.<sup>36</sup>

According to Mr. Livingstone's view, the Bible is written by men, but they had a "partner" – a little like a "ghost writer." But it wasn't a collaborative effort. Mr. Livingstone claims that God produced the Bible through men's "interpretations of how God is working in history," a neo-orthodox view. This statement directly contradicts what the Bible says of itself:

knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.

2 Peter 1:20

Notice also that he says "It's done by people in true partnership with the illuminating Spirit of God." There is a big difference between "illumination" and "inspiration." All Christians receive "illumination" through Christ, who illumines their spiritual darkness.

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light

Ephesians 5:8

to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Acts 26:18

The prophets and the apostles, or more properly the very words they wrote, on the other hand, were *inspired* by the Holy Spirit.<sup>37, 38</sup>

""And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore."

Isaiah 59:21

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

1 Corinthians 2:13

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 Thessalonians 2:13

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

2 Timothy 3:16

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:21

I get the distinct feeling that Mr. Livingstone is doing a little postmodern doctrinal remodeling. He has obscured the line of distinction between the prophets and apostles and the rest of us. By his way of thinking, the Scriptures are the equivalent of a Christian's journal entries describing their spiritual experiences for the month. The Scriptures become an uninspired book.

To put the ideas of those who share this view of "inspiration" into perspective, I could just as well claim that this article is "inspired" in the same manner and to the same extent as Scripture. Any Christian who writes on Christian topics could make the same claim – which is the way Scripture is viewed in some parts of the Emerging Church.

### **The Bible - Subject to "Interpretation"**

When God's Word is viewed as man's word, the Bible is reduced to one voice among many. Since the Bible is no longer considered by many Emergents to be inspired in the historical orthodox sense, it is viewed more as one of the co-captains of the team. This Emerging viewpoint is reflected by the following quotes from participants in the Emerging conversation:

The biblical story of God is told and contributed to<sup>39</sup>

...I stand as part of a triangle of interactions. There is my self, my community, and the Bible. All the elements interact with one another in ways that strengthen the fabric of the whole.<sup>40</sup>

The Bible is an "authoritative community member."<sup>41</sup>

All of this undermining of Scripture leads to the inevitable claim that the Bible is difficult to understand and has to be "interpreted":

...we are handling a New Testament whose letters are out of chronological order and whose books are divided up into chapters and verses. This makes understanding the social-historical context and setting of the New Testament

writings virtually impossible to grasp. And it opens the door to such spiritual hazards as isolated proof-texting to “prove” doctrines and theological systems.<sup>42</sup>

He [Jesus] is giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible.<sup>43</sup>

...the Bible is open-ended.

It has to be interpreted. And if it isn't interpreted, then it can't be put into action. So if we are serious about following God, then we have to interpret the Bible. It is not possible to simply do what the Bible says. We must first make decisions about what it means at this time, in this place, for these people.<sup>44</sup>

Emerging Church leader Spencer Burke completely subverts Scripture:

So how do I interpret this particular Scripture? ...I don't believe it can be used to argue that Christianity is the only true religion. First, Christianity as a religion didn't exist when Jesus spoke these words [John 14:6]. Compounding this point are two additional facts: no one actually recorded Jesus' words at the time he spoke them, so we have no proof that they are indeed his words, and what he did say, he said in Aramaic, which means that nothing in the Bible as translated into any other language can be taken literally anyway.<sup>45</sup>

The Bible is clear in and of itself - it doesn't need “interpretation.” No doctrine is in dispute because of a lack of biblical clarity. Conscientious Christians, when stumbling upon a difficult passage, rather than offering up their own “interpretation,” use the prudent method of referring to another passage related to the topic that is easily understood to illuminate the initial passage - *Scripture interprets Scripture*.

The Word of God is not a dark, impenetrable book, but a lamp to my feet and a light for my path (Psalm 119:105). The words of Scripture are not inscrutable, rather they give understanding to the simple (Psalm 119:130). Paul tells Timothy that *all* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). The Hebrews were admonished for *not* knowing and understanding the Scriptures (Hebrews 5:11-14). We are able to understand the Scriptures from childhood (2 Timothy 3:15).

Praise God that He has given us a wonderfully clear book that provides us with all that we need to attain forgiveness, life, and salvation, and join the Psalmist in singing:

How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Psalm 119:103

With the abandonment of Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, community, story, and biblical “interpretation” have supplanted the clear Word of Scripture. Where the Bible was once the sole source and norm of theology, for some it is now no more than “...the non-fictional story of God’s involvement with people...” and “...the lenses through which we look to better understand our world and our lives.”<sup>46</sup> The Emerging Church is turning to other avenues to discover God, including *experience*. It is this topic that will be considered next in *The Emerging Church, Part 3: The Experiential Road*.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at:

<http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, 2000) 14. Thanks to Mike Oppenheimer at Let Us Reason Ministries for pointing out this quote.
2. “rationalism,” *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1), Random House, Inc., 08 Feb 2007, <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rationalism>>.
3. McLaren, *Other Side*, 35.
4. This topic will be discussed further in “*The Emerging Church, Part 6: A Social Gospel?*”
5. Formerly on the Emergent Village website, [emergentvillage.org](http://emergentvillage.org).
6. I had hoped that this book would present the Emerging Church in a balanced, scholarly fashion. My hopes were rapidly dashed. While it is comprehensive, it is nothing more than an “infomercial” for the Emerging Church.
7. Brian McLaren, interview with R. Alan Streett, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” *Criswell Theological Review*, 3.2, Spring 2006, 7, 10 Mar 2007 <<http://criswell.wordpress.com/files/2006/03/3,2%20InterviewwithBrianMcLaren%28Streett%29.PDF>>.
8. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 125.
9. Bob Wright, “The Emerging (Emergent) Church,” 15; quoting Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 46-47. Available for download at: <<http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/The%20Emerging%20Church%20Master.doc>>.
10. Gibbs and Bolger, 68.
11. John R. Franke, “Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics,” 15, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://64.224.192.90/downloads/resources/franke/ReformingTheology.pdf>>.
12. Only Scripture has the authority to establish doctrine, not the Church, and certainly not “the world.” The Church can speak no word, article of faith, or doctrine on its own, but only faithfully speak Christ’s Word as found in Holy Scripture.

13. This quote was taken from page 26 in chapter 3, “Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and The Emerging Church,” of R. Scott Smith’s book Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005) in its pre-publication form, available here: [http://members.tripod.com/carla\\_b/emergentmovement/rscottsmith.html](http://members.tripod.com/carla_b/emergentmovement/rscottsmith.html)], 01 Mar 2007.
14. Leonard Sweet, Andy Crouch, Brian D. McLaren, Erwin Raphael McManus, and Michael Horton, The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives, ed. Frederica Matthewes-Green (El Cajon: EmergentYS Books/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 209-210.
15. There is more than meets the eye in the community/group consensus aspect of the Emerging Church. The transformation they speak of is not always a transformation of rebirth through the Word; it is sometimes a transformation due to the Hegelian dialectic process, and other forms of behavior modification. If you’re interested, here are several articles that deal with this topic:
- a) Orrel Steincamp, “Cross Over To The Otherside,” The Plumbline, 9.2, March/April, 22 Mar 2007 <<http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com/orrel17.html>>.
- b) Berit Kjos, “Re-Inventing the Church - Part 1,” Kjos Ministries, 22 Mar 2007 <[http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/2002/change\\_agent-1.htm](http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/2002/change_agent-1.htm)>.
- c) Berit Kjos, “Re-Inventing the Church - Part 2,” Kjos Ministries, 22 Mar 2007 <<http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/2002/change2.htm>>.
16. I agree with Ben that Christianity is not a set of “abstract doctrines.” Christianity is doctrinal, but not primarily *abstract* doctrines. [The following is adapted from Dr. Francis Pieper’s discussion on doctrine as it relates to modernism. Notice how modernism and the Emerging Church share the same characteristic in this case - dismissing doctrine. Text enclosed in quotation marks are direct quotes from Dr. Pieper.] “The Word spoken in the very beginning about the Seed of the woman, who would crush the head of the Serpent (Gen. 3:15), what is it but doctrine?” The entire Old Testament was written, as the Apostle Paul assures us, for our learning in Romans 15:4. The Greek word he uses for “learning,” is *didaskalia*, which means doctrine, learning, or teaching. Jesus engaged in teaching. He teaches from the ship (Luke 5:3), on the mount (Matt. 5:2), in the synagogs (Luke 4:15), and as He went about the land (Matthew 4:23). The great commission is about teaching (Matthew 28:20). “Paul declared, taught, publicly and from house to house, all the counsel of God (Acts 20:20, 27). Teaching the saving doctrine was his chief business, and he tells his successors in the ministry that it must be their chief business....the Apostle John deems the adherence to the doctrine of Christ of such great importance that he instructs the churches to deny Christian fellowship to all who do not bring the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11). When in spite of all this modern theologians insist that Holy Scripture must not be regarded as “doctrine” nor received as a ‘manual’ of the Christian religion, it is evident that their conception of the Christian religion is diametrically opposed to that of Christ and His Apostles and Prophets.”
- Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950) 70-71.
17. Benjamin Sternke, “Narrative theology and the missional church,” ben’s blog, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://benjaminsternke.typepad.com/benjaminsternke/2006/09/>>

- [narrative\\_theol.html](#)>.
18. John O'Keefe, "Church 3.0, The Upgrade," *next-wave magazine*, Nov 2001, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.next-wave.org/nov01/church30.htm>>.
  19. I enjoy reading what John O'Keefe has to say. I don't always agree with him, but I give him credit for saying what he thinks. He is indeed "genuine" and "authentic." Some of the Emerging Church leaders are not genuine and authentic, in part because they are unwilling to take a stand on doctrinal issues. They dodge answering question that might "offend."
  20. John O'Keefe, "church xp, the up-grade - part two, creativity," formerly available at [ginkworld.net](http://ginkworld.net).
  21. There are many types of literature in the Bible. To say that one type is of more importance than another would seem to violate the meaning of 2 Timothy 3:16, which states that *all* Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Emerging Church authors often criticize the mainline church for a modernistic approach to theology based solely on propositions and abstract doctrines. Lutheran pastor Harold Senkbeil refutes that accusation by espousing narrative: "It's no wonder Jesus was always teaching in parables. Ordinary language just wouldn't do justice to the things He had to say. And so He spoke in story and analogy to describe realities far deeper than human eyes could see. They were the hidden realities of the kingdom of God." Harold L. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994) 92.
  22. John C. Poirier points out the "down side" of narrative theology. I quote him in part because I think he makes a valid point, and also for "entertainment value." Better get out your dictionary: "On a strictly literary level, of course, narratives are not incompatible with propositionalism, as they are normally read as sets of propositions set in historical sequence. But when scholars and theologians point to the presence of a (literary) narrative as a warrant for a narratological understanding of truth (that is, an alethiology in which the truth is unsettled until an act of interpretation), they not only are committing a blatant non sequitur, but they are pulling up the propositionalist underpinning of the apostolic kerygma [the Gospel]. The problem is that serious-minded people (like Richard Hays) make this move all the time. They don't explain how such a move can be made rationally. They just do it."  
John C. Poirier, "An Emergent Village Affirmation of Faith?" Online posting, comments #12, 06 Jul 2006, *Jesus Creed*, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1235>>.
  23. Neil Livingstone, "How can you trust the Bible?", 9, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://64.224.192.90/downloads/resources/other/howcanyoutrustthebible.pdf>>.
  24. Livingstone, 10.
  25. Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 111.
  26. Livingstone, 10.
  27. Rolf Preus, "Luther Revisited: The Doctrine of Justification Is Still the Issue," *Christ For Us*, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/rolf.html>>.
  28. Pieper, Vol. 1, 62.
  29. "Divine inspiration was that agency by which God supernaturally communicated to

the intellect of those who wrote not only the correct conception of all that was to be written, but also the conception of the words themselves and of everything by which they were to be expressed and by which He also instigated their will to the act of writing.”

John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics, quoting Baier (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934) 102.

30. The word “radical” is frequently encountered in Emerging Church literature, sometimes as a kind of anti-modern enticement. Here are three examples:
- 1) “...to understand the gospel in terms of Jesus’ radical, profound, and expansive message of the kingdom of God.” Formerly available at emergentvillage.org.
  - 2) “...‘kingdom of God’: a life that is radically different from the way people are living these days, a life that is full and overflowing, a higher life that is centered in an interactive relationship with God and with Jesus. Let’s render it simply “an extraordinary life to the full centered in a relationship with God.”
- Brian D. McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006) 37.
- 3) “This entails a radical doctrine of embodiment of God in the very substance of creation.”
- Leonard Sweet, Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 1991) 125. Available for free download at: <http://www.leonardsweet.com/Quantum/>.
31. Pastor Gary Gilley quotes Michael Kruger: “What are the postmodernists’ criteria for ‘truth’? Simply what works. ...they define their ‘truth’ by more pragmatic concerns: What makes me feel good? What solves my problems? What is attractive to me?” Gary Gilley, “Postmodernism - Part 2,” Southern View Chapel, Think on These Things articles, 8.8, Nov 2002, 01 Mar 2007 [http://www.svchapel.org/resources/articles/read\\_articles.asp?id=43](http://www.svchapel.org/resources/articles/read_articles.asp?id=43).
32. Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” Christianity Today, 48.11, Nov 2004, 36. Can be viewed at [http://www.culturemakers.com/articles/the\\_emergent\\_mystique](http://www.culturemakers.com/articles/the_emergent_mystique) 01 Mar 2007. Thanks to Tim Challies at Challies.com for pointing out this quote.
33. Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 44.
34. Bell, 67.
35. Brian D. McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am 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 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 180.
36. Livingstone, 3.
37. John Theodore Mueller quotes R. W. Hiley: “This miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost [divine inspiration] had not the writers themselves for its object,—these were only His instruments and were soon to pass away;—its objects were the holy books themselves.” Mueller, 102.
38. Not a few of those in the Emerging Church claim that the Bible is “inspired,” but use the term in the neo-orthodox sense. To quote Theopedia: “The Bible is said to contain within it an inspired witness, but it is a mistake to identify Scripture as the Word of God; Jesus, the person, is the Word of God. The Bible can become the Word of God only when God so chooses to use it as the Word of God in someones

[sic] life. Therefore, the actual text and words of Scripture are not the Word of God. Instead, it is an instrument to communicate the true Word of God - Jesus - to those whom God chooses to reveal it to....While Neo-Orthodoxy claims to hold many of the orthodox doctrines of the faith, it radically departs in the most critical area - the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures. Without the Scriptures as literal truth there is nothing to guide them but one's own experience and philosophy. Hence, it is difficult to find any doctrinal consistency among Neo-Orthodox theologians, even with regard to critical things such as the nature of the atonement."

"Neo-Orthodoxy," Theopedia, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.theopedia.com/Neo-orthodoxy>>.

39. "Our Dreams" page, Solomon's Porch, 28 Feb 2007 <[http://www.solomonsporch.com/aboutus\\_page\\_group/ourdreams.html](http://www.solomonsporch.com/aboutus_page_group/ourdreams.html)>.
40. Livingstone, 5.
41. Doug Pagitt, "The Emergent Church and Postmodern Spirituality Debate," CD-ROM, Session Three, Minneapolis, Twin City Fellowship, Jan 2006.
42. Frank Viola, "Will the Emerging Church Fully Emerge?" EmergingChurch.info, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/frankviola/index.htm>>.
43. Bell, 50.
44. Bell, 46.
45. Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor, A Heretics Guide to Eternity, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) 107. Thanks to Rick Steroni at [www.brutallyhonest.org](http://www.brutallyhonest.org) for pointing out this quote.
46. "Worship Elements" page, Solomon's Porch, 01 Mar 2007 <[http://www.solomonsporch.com/worship\\_gatherings\\_pagegroup/worship\\_elements.html](http://www.solomonsporch.com/worship_gatherings_pagegroup/worship_elements.html)>.

***Sola Scriptura*** • ***Sola Gratia*** • ***Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 3: The Experiential Road***

*by Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®, Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

In Part 2 of our discussion, we considered how “truth” in the Emerging Church is being discovered through a cooperative effort of community, story, and the “interpretation” of God’s Word. Holy Scripture has therefore lost much of its authority, creating a void that is being filled by methods other than “going to the book.”

### **The Experiential Road**

One way the Emerging Church is filling the void created by the loss of the authority of Scripture is through *experience*. Those who have abandoned or avoid propositional truths are much more inclined to attempt to discover truth through experience. Here are quotes from several authors sympathetic to the Emerging Church:

...they are extremely experiential. That is, they learn, grow, develop and commit based on their own experience with truth - not according to someone else’s encounter or someone else’s retelling of an encounter. Based on the postmodern preference for the experiential, postmodern people might worship best in an environment that encourages and enables them to encounter God (and the truths of God) firsthand. ...our goal in the Celtic service is to let people encounter God through prayer, reflective music, meditation, and the engagement of all five senses.”<sup>1</sup>

...they draw from deep and ancient Christian traditions. Candles, incense, darkness, labyrinths, physically acting out various features of the Christian message and experience, even dead silence are some of the specific features of EM [Emerging Movement] worship.”<sup>2</sup>

...we can no longer afford to lead with formulations. people [*sic*] today are moved by their experiences of faith much more than by rational arguments or doctrines about faith (no matter how ‘true’ or precise).<sup>3</sup>

The experiential nature of the Emerging Church is best seen in their gatherings (the

Emerging Church word for “church service”). *Some* of their emphasis in this area is good. God created us with five senses, and those five senses, where they help us to focus on the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, are an adjunct to worship. Take art as an example. Stained glass windows are a staple of many churches, and often depict or symbolize biblical scenes. Many Emerging churches emphasize art, including that created by their church members, displayed in their church and sometimes on the internet. When this artwork isn’t a distraction, but rather points us to the Gospel, it can certainly be God-pleasing. At times though, the experience sought is not one which points to the Gospel, but one which points inward.

### **The Testimony of the LORD is Sure**

God speaks with us as a loving father through our own unique human way - using *words*. He spoke directly to Adam and Eve. He spoke in Old Testament times through the Prophets, initially by repeated oral transmission, and ultimately by the Old Testament Scriptures - *the written Word*. He then spoke to the world through Jesus Christ - *the Word incarnate*. Ultimately, the writers of the New Testament wrote down God’s revelation to us in the form of the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation. He also speaks to us today through the faithful preaching of the pastor - *the spoken Word*.

God has also chosen to come to us through the Sacraments, *the visible Word* - Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. There He offers us forgiveness of sins via the spoken Word, together with bread / body, wine / blood, and water. All of these taken together, Scripture, Communion, and Baptism, are called “the means of grace.” They are the *means* through which God graciously offers to us forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and renews and strengthens our faith – in other words, *everything* spiritual that we need in life. They are the *only* means by which God chooses to come to us today.

The outward reality of the Word and Sacraments are precisely the way in which God works on our inward experience; *that* is the way to a true Christian experience that frees us from a life of bondage to works of the Law, liberating us for a missional life of service to our neighbor. The Word *is* life. Listen to Jesus’ words in John 6:63: “**The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.**”

Dan Kimball, an Emerging Church pastor makes this comment:

Modern thinkers want things orderly and systematic because they learn in a logical and progressive manner. They prefer, generally, to sit and listen. Emerging post-Christian generations, on the other hand, long to experience a transcendent God during a worship gathering rather than simply learn about him.<sup>4</sup>

His thought is common among many Christians, both inside and outside of the Emerging Church. People are looking for something “more,” and they are turning to their own emotions and experience to find it. There is no denying that emotions do play

a role in our Christian walk. I am often exhilarated as the congregation sings the Sanctus:

Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He, blessed is He, blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest.

But human emotions are not the way to “experience” God. He has not equipped us with an emotions-based sixth sense capable of communing with the spirit world. Emotions are internal to us and subjective, influenced by a myriad of factors and often unreliable – they are not a *means of grace*. Our only reliable way of experiencing God is for Him to come to us externally through His means of grace. It is through His Word, and trust in the promises He offers, that my troubled heart is stilled. In the ebb and flow of my faith, if I have doubts, I know I can look to the promise on which that faith is based. Whether or not I “feel” or “experience” the Holy Spirit acting in me, I trust in God’s promises. Those promises are sure. They are unchangeable:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

John 6:47

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God,

Ephesians 2:8

"It is the LORD who goes before you; He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Deuteronomy 31:8

God promised Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars. Yet Abraham was 99 years old, and his wife Sarah was well past the age of childbearing. When Abraham considered their health, what he saw was a man “as good as dead” and an infertile wife. From an experiential and emotional standpoint, he and his wife were “worn out.” Yet Abraham ignored the physical evidence and trusted God’s promise, and a year later Isaac was born. Abraham believed the LORD, and God counted Abraham’s faith as righteousness. In much the same way we are to put our trust in God’s promises, rather than in our own experience and emotions.

Whatever we know of God, God has revealed to us. Our knowledge of Him is completely external to us. We cannot approach God of our own accord, because he dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see (1 Timothy 6:16). There are certain things that man can know of God through God’s revelation of Himself in the realm of nature and of human history. God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly perceived, being understood through what has been made (Romans 1:20). His witness of Himself is seen in the blessings He

continues to pour out on mankind; rain and fruitful seasons, that satisfy our hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17). He reveals Himself in His continued governance of all nations (Acts 17:26), and His rule of His earthly kingdom by Law, having written that Law on all people's hearts (Romans 2:14-15). But that is essentially all we can know of God via natural knowledge. *All* other knowledge of God, including His plan of salvation for us, is acquired through the power of the Scriptures.

Those in the Emerging Church “long to *experience* a transcendent God,”<sup>5</sup> and are looking for “a full sensory immersion in the divine.”<sup>6</sup> That experience can only be found through God's divine power:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

2 Peter 1:3-4

and that divine power is in the Word of God:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Romans 1:16

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

To paraphrase Dr. John Theodore Mueller:

The Word of God doesn't operate in a natural way through logic appealing to reason, or through rhetorical eloquence, appealing to emotions, but in a supernatural manner, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit, who is inseparably combined with the Word, persuades the human mind of the divine truth through the very Word which it contemplates.<sup>7</sup>

As St. Paul says, “and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). God's power is not separate from the Word of Scripture. “...The Holy Ghost does not operate beside or outside the Word, ...but always in and through the Word,”<sup>8</sup> to effect in us

- faith,

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

- regeneration,

since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

1 Peter 1:23

- and renewal,

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:13

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation—

1 Peter 2:2

If you are looking for a truly spiritual experience, savor God's Word and Sacraments. *Study God's Word.* Revel in it. It is a lamp to your feet and a light for your path. Fix it in your hearts and minds. Impress it on your children. Talk about it when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. *It is truth.* It is sweet. *Eat it up.* He who eats this bread will *never* go hungry. *Drink it up.* He who drinks *this* water will *never* go thirsty. *Indulge in the Lord's Supper.* The bread that we break and the cup of blessing that we bless are a participation in the body and blood of Christ. *Delight in your Baptism.* Through Baptism you are baptized into Christ's death, that you may also rise with Him and walk in newness of life.

To summarize, it is through the Holy Spirit, indissolubly joined with Scripture, via the means of grace, that Christians "experience a transcendent God." No appeal to a solely internal emotional experience will do. *God comes to us.* Experience is trustworthy only as it is captive to "the knowledge of him who called us." "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

The Emerging Church, as it seeks to experience God internally through human emotion, may fail to find Him, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). At the same time, where their "experience" involves the clear Word of God, they may indeed find Him in spite of their method. They are, however, also attempting to experience God in a place where they will never find Him – *mysticism*. It is this topic that will be considered next, in *The Emerging Church, Part 4: The Mystical Road*.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at:

<http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Chad Hall, "Forward to the Past: Ancient Christianity and the Future of the Church," CoolChurches, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.coolchurches.com/articles/forwardtothepast.html>>.
2. Scot McKnight, "What is the Emerging Church? Pro-Abolition," Jesus Creed, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=520>>.
3. "Service and mission" page, [apostleschurch.org](http://apostleschurch.org), 24 Mar 2007 <[http://apostleschurch.org/community\\_service.php](http://apostleschurch.org/community_service.php)>.
4. Dan Kimball, The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 121.
5. Kimball, 121.
6. "Now Ready for Prime Time Players: Reinventing Christianity for Our Day," Let Us Reason Ministries, quoted from Leonard Sweet's Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.letusreason.org/current73.htm>>.
7. John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934) 133.
8. Mueller, 134.

***Sola Scriptura* • *Sola Gratia* • *Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 4: The Mystical Road***

*by Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

In their book Emerging Churches, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger quote Emerging Church pastor Spencer Burke:

“A move away from intellectual Christianity is essential. We must move to the mystical.”<sup>1</sup>

Emerging Church enthusiast Frank Viola comments that

The emerging church phenomenon has re-ignited a healthy interest in the Christian mystics who emphasized spiritual encounter over against mere academic knowledge of God and the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

Emerging Church leader Tony Jones says

propositional truth is out and mysticism is in. People are not necessarily put off by a religion that does not ‘make sense’ – they are more concerned with whether a religion can bring them into contact with God.<sup>3</sup>

These types of statements are indicative of many in the Emerging Church. They are the next step in pushing the experiential boundaries of the knowledge of God outwards, away from Scripture. Let me emphasize here that mysticism is not denotative of all Emergents, and that they are not alone in their embrace of mysticism. There are many Christians of other “walks” who are also being lured away from a true knowledge of the Lord by mysticism.

One of those who has been enticed by mysticism is Spencer Burke, founder of the Emerging website “TheOOZE.” He chronicles his own allurements away from the truth on his website, describing his thoughts after having attended a three-day silent retreat with mystic universalist Brennan Manning:

Shortly afterward, I stopped reading from the approved evangelical reading list and began to distance myself from the evangelical agenda. I discovered new authors and new voices at the bookstore—Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and St. Teresa of Avila. The more I read, the more intrigued I became. Contemplative spirituality seemed to open up a whole new way for me to understand and experience God. I was deeply moved by works like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Dark Night of the Soul* and the *Early Writings of the Desert Fathers*.

As my journey continued, I began to feel it might be time for me to leave professional ministry.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that Spencer drifted from his conservative theological moorings. Like the Sirens of Greek mythology, the mystical authors he lists have shipwrecked many a “sailor.”<sup>5</sup>

Spencer mentions that “Contemplative spirituality seemed to open up a whole new way for me to understand and experience God.” The definition of contemplative spirituality is “a belief system that uses ancient mystical practices to induce altered states of consciousness (the silence) and is rooted in mysticism and the occult but is often wrapped in Christian terminology. The premise of contemplative spirituality is pantheistic (God is all) and panentheistic (God is in all).”<sup>6</sup> The Desert Fathers, whom Spencer also mentions, are generally regarded as the first “Christian mystics,” a phrase which I consider to be an oxymoron. Quoting Ray Yungen:

The contemplative movement traces its roots back to these monks who promoted the mantra as a *prayer tool*. One meditation scholar made this connection when he said:

The meditation practices and rules for living of these earliest Christian monks bear strong similarity to those of their Hindu and Buddhist renunciate brethren several kingdoms to the East...the meditative techniques they adopted for finding their God suggest either a borrowing from the East or a spontaneous rediscovery.<sup>7,8</sup>

The goal of mysticism is to discover hidden knowledge about God or other subjects. Webster’s definition of the word “mystical” reads:

involving or having the nature of an individual’s direct subjective communion with God or ultimate reality <the mystical experience of the Inner Light><sup>9</sup>

As discussed in Part 3, God chooses to come to us only through His *means of grace*, which are the Scriptures and the Sacraments (Holy Communion and Baptism). Seeking God through other means that are internal to us rather than external, and subjective

rather than objective, is fraught with danger. God specifically forbids mysticism in multiple places in the Bible:

And when they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony [the Scriptures]! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

Isaiah 8:19-20

The form which mysticism takes does not matter to God - all forms are forbidden, whether yoga, magic, dream interpretation, the silence, spiritism, contemplative prayer, occultism, labyrinths, or other techniques. While there are instances recorded in the Bible in which God's people had dreams and visions, in those instances God provided the revelation according to His plan, not the other way around.

One of the mystical practices which is influencing the Emerging Church is that of *contemplative prayer*, one of the centerpieces of contemplative spirituality.

### **Contemplative Prayer in the Emerging Church**

Contemplative prayer, also known as centering prayer, or breath prayer, is encouraged by some in the Emerging Church. It is high on the experiential "to do" list. Tony Jones, the National Coordinator of Emergent-US, in his book The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life, advocates a form of contemplative prayer called centering prayer. This type of "prayer" was developed by three Catholic monks in the 1970's, Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington. It was adapted, in part, from techniques described in the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical book The Cloud of Unknowing.<sup>10</sup> To quote The Sacred Way:

While the number of steps varies between authors, the basic formulation is this:

1. As you sit comfortably with your eyes closed, let yourself settle down. Let go of all the thoughts, tensions, and sensations you may feel and begin to rest in love of God who dwells within.
2. Effortlessly, choose a word, the symbol of your intention to surrender to God's presence, and let the word be gently present within you. The word should be one syllable, if possible, and should communicate God's love to you.
3. When you become aware of thoughts or as internal sensations arise, take this as your signal to gently return to the word, the symbol of your intention to let go and rest in God's presence.
4. If thoughts subside and you find yourself restfully aware, simply let go even of the word. Just be in that stillness. When thoughts begin to stir again,

gently return to the word. Use the word as your only response to thoughts, questions, or anxieties that arise in your mind.

5. At the end of your prayer time (20 minutes in the morning and evening is a good balance), take a couple of minutes to come out of the silence—even if you don't feel you need it. Many people find this a perfect time to internally express to God their thanks and to pray for others in need of God's grace. Slowly reciting the Lord's Prayer is another gentle way to come out of the prayer.

The other form of contemplative prayer, called Christian Meditation, was introduced by Catholic Benedictine monk John Main, and is done by repeating a single word, or *mantra*, over and over again. Using either technique, the goal, according to Thomas Keating, is to move “beyond dependence on concepts and words to a direct encounter with God on the level of faith and interior silence.”<sup>11</sup>

Either form of contemplative prayer is an occult practice that will not lead to an encounter with God, but may lead to contact with a demon (a satanic angel - see 1 Timothy 4:1 for instance). The one thing it will not be is a prayer to God.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Origins of Contemplative Prayer**

Through the 4,000 years of recorded biblical history, through all of the believers whose lives are richly illustrated in the Bible, and through the wealth of prayers offered up in the Bible, there is not a single instance of contemplative prayer. While there are a few threadbare arguments offering Scriptural support for contemplative prayer, they are about as impressive as the Mormon basis for their doctrine of the three degrees of glory after the resurrection. Their doctrine of the three “kingdoms,” the celestial, telestial, and terrestrial kingdoms, is based on a *single* totally out of context Bible verse, 1 Corinthians 15:40.

There are no biblical examples of anyone picking a word to use as a “symbol of their intention to surrender to God's presence,” or to repeat a word over and over as a form of prayer, or to empty their head of all thought in prayer, or to concentrate on their breathing as they pray (another option in the contemplative prayer pantheon). There is, however, Christ's specific command to avoid mantras:

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

Matthew 6:7

I am very suspicious of a prayer technique not mentioned in the Bible. God is purposeful in what He has caused to be written. I've already mentioned that mysticism is by default “ruled out” by God, and that the Desert Fathers may have borrowed their ideas from the east. This doubt leads me to ask a couple of pointed questions about today's version of contemplative prayer: 1) What is the origin of contemplative prayer?

and 2) What is its end result?

The origin of the “Christian” version of contemplative prayer used today is not in dispute, although its origin is not always brought to light. Tony Jones mentioned the mystical book The Cloud of Unknowing in his description of the origins of contemplative prayer, but he failed to mention the heavy emphasis that Zen Buddhism has had on the genesis of the contemplative prayer project of Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Keating, along with his monk associates, were heavily versed in Zen. In an interview with Thomas Keating, when asked if his experience with Zen informed his Christian faith, his answer was “Yes, it enriched it. I read the Gospel from a different perspective and saw the truth of Zen in much of the Gospel.”<sup>14</sup> The monks are lacking in discernment. God, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, doesn’t take advice from other gods, and we shouldn’t either. The First Commandment immediately comes to mind: THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME (Exodus 20:3). Or consider the first two verses from the Book of Psalms:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, And on his law he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2

Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, the New Age, and all other interlopers are no different than idols made of wood and stone. The LORD, who created heaven and earth by the breath of His mouth, who parted the Red Sea and crushed pharaoh’s chariots with his mighty right arm, will not share His glory with another.

Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

Isaiah 40:21

All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame.

Isaiah 44:9

To quote Thomas Keating in the same interview, regarding the inception of the other form of contemplative prayer developed by John Main, called Christian Meditation, it “is rooted in the experience John Main had in India. He learned a mantra from a Hindu source and translated that into a Christian context, finding sources in the early Christian tradition that reinforced his understanding.”

Thus both forms of today’s contemplative prayer were influenced by, or originated directly from, Zen Buddhism ideals. When the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, God commanded them:

take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?--that I also may do the same.'

Deuteronomy 12:30

Those who have developed contemplative prayer and their followers are “doing the same.”

Based on this discussion, I flee from contemplative prayer. Yet there are those whose view of God’s commands and of Scripture in general are similar to pirate Captain Barbarossa’s view of the *Pirate’s Code* in the movie *Pirate’s of the Caribbean*: “They’re more like guidelines.” They appeal to the *code* only when it works to their advantage. At other times, they lay it aside for a more opportune moment. For those who insist on viewing God’s commands as guidelines, let’s take a look at the end result of contemplative prayer.

### **The “Fruit” of Contemplative Prayer**

It is easy to believe that an eastern or New Age approach to contemplative prayer might have a bad ending, but what about a Christian approach?

No matter which flavor of mysticism you are dealing with, eastern, New Age, or “Christian,” they all have the same pathway, an altered state of consciousness, brought on by focusing on or repeating a single word or phrase, to the exclusion of all conscious thought. If you think that slapping a “**CHRISTIAN**” label on the outside of the contemplative box will change the inside contents, think again. To quote former New Ager Elliot Miller:

For the responsive subject, “ASCs” (altered states of consciousness) can produce a profound mystical sense of “transcendence” of individuality and identification with everything. Such experiences of undifferentiated consciousness suggest to the seeker that ultimate reality itself is undifferentiated; everything is one, and the nature of the One must be consciousness (since at the peak of the mystical state consciousness is virtually all that is experienced)...The person who actively pursues or passively submits himself or herself to ASCs is setting himself up for nothing short of a religious conversion...<sup>15</sup>

The “religious conversion” Elliot refers to is the mystical belief that *all is one*. Russell Chandler states:

This premise [“All is One”] is known as monism, where distinctions of

apparent opposites disappear, as does the line between material creation and the force or energy that creates it. Consciousness is not confined to human beings, but applies to all reality. It is best described in impersonal terms such as Principle, Mind, Power, Unity, and especially, Energy.<sup>16</sup>

To go along with monism is its “evil twin,” pantheism. Pantheism is defined as “God is all things. The universe and all life are connected in a sum. This sum is the total reality of God. Thus, man, animals, plants, and all physical matter are seen as equal. The assumption—all is one, therefore all is deity.”<sup>17</sup> This is sounding more far-fetched by the sentence, but these premises are exactly the kind of beliefs that mystics, even Christian mystics, harbor.

Leonard Sweet, who has been called “the Emerging church’s most intellectual and influential thinker,”<sup>18</sup> demonstrates his monistic and pantheistic leanings in his book Quantum Spirituality:

Consciousness is even more than a causal reality. The ultimate reality of the universe appears to be consciousness, out of which energymatter arises.<sup>19</sup>

The most powerful forces in the universe are spiritual: the energies of divine unconditional love.<sup>20</sup>

...some of the last words poet/activist/contemplative/bridge between East and West Thomas Merton uttered:

We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity.<sup>21</sup>

Human minds are individual, but not singular or separated. They connect at some mysterious level not accessible to ordinary conscious awareness. God is the Spirit of the universe, the consciousness of the cosmos: its energy, its information, its thought.<sup>22</sup>

Father Alan Jones, another contemplative prayer exponent, in his book Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit Without Disconnecting Your Mind, shares similar thoughts:

...the sense of the divine came to me through other persons and wasn’t and isn’t, in the first instance, a matter of belief. Eventually I came to appreciate the insight of the mystics that we are nothing else but questions and longings, and that these deepening questions lead us beyond tribe and class into a vision of humanity that leaves no one out.

...I began to see that an energy had been at work in my life all along that is more than “me,” more than the longings that bubble around just under the

surface of my life. ...I'm grateful for this energy. I am also confused and frustrated by it. And most important of all, I find that I am in love with it (or is it a him? a her?—it has the characteristics of the personal). Being connected to this energy became the most important thing in my life. Life turned into a romance of being lost and found.<sup>23</sup>

Basil Pennington, one of the Catholic monks who developed centering prayer, illustrates how, through centering prayer, “God” becomes a monistic “divine creating energy,” and consciousness and creation become one:

When we go to the center of our being and pass through that center into the very center of God we get in immediate touch with this divine creating energy. This is not a new idea. It is the common teaching of the Christian Fathers of the Greek tradition. When we dare with the full assent of love to unleash these energies within us not surprisingly the initial experience is of a flood of chaotic thoughts, memories, emotions and feelings. This is why wise spiritual Fathers and mothers counsel a gentle entering into this experience. Not too much too fast. But it is this release that allows all of this chaos within us with all its imprisoning stress to be brought into harmony so that not only there might be peace and harmony within but that the divine energy may have the freedom to forward the evolution of consciousness in us and through us, as a part of the whole, in the whole of the creation.<sup>24</sup>

Leonard Sweet, Brian McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer offer this unvarnished comment on monism:

“If modern western Christianity has become overly dualistic, might a measured dose of Zenlike monism help correct our hyperdualism?”<sup>25</sup>

Ray Yungen, in his book A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World's Religions, has this to say about the mystical experience:

The sad thing about this is that these meditative experiences are so real and convincing, and as people often testify, are very beautiful. They experience intense light flooding them, along with a sense of infinite wisdom. In this state, they also experience what many call ecstasy and feel a sense of unity with everything.<sup>26</sup>

Ray's comments offer the perfect foil for Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren's mystical experience, recalled in his book A Generous Orthodoxy:

But on this occasion, for a period of about 20 minutes, I felt that every tree, every blade of grass, and every pool of water became especially eloquent

with God's grandeur. Somehow they seemed to become transparent—or perhaps translucent is the better word—because each thing in its particularity was still utterly visible and unspeakably important: the movement of the grass in waves swayed by the wind, the way the goldfinches perch just so on a purple thistle plant. These specific, concrete things became translucent in the sense that a powerful, indescribable, invisible light seemed to shine through. The beauty of the creations around me, which I am always careful to notice, seemed on this day to explode, seemed to detonate, seemed to radiate with glory.

An ecstasy overcame me that I can't describe. It brings tears to my eyes as I sit here and type. It was the exuberant joy of simply seeing these masterpieces of God's creation...and knowing myself to be among them. It was to be one of them, and to feel and know that "we"—all of these creatures, molecules, and phenomena—were together known and loved by God, who embraced us all into the ultimate "We."<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, contemplative prayer and mysticism lead to the belief that all religions worship the same God, and the traditions of other religions should be incorporated into Christianity. Leonard Sweet states:

A globalization of evangelism "in connection" with others, and a globally "informed" gospel, is capable of talking across the fence with Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim—people from other so called "new" religious traditions ("new" only to us)—without assumption of superiority and power. One Caribbean theologian has called this the "decolonization of theology."~It will take a decolonized theology for Christians to appreciate the genuineness of others' faiths, and to see and celebrate what is good, beautiful, and true in their beliefs without any illusions that down deep we all are believers in the same thing.<sup>28</sup>

Basil Pennington remarks:

It is my sense, from having meditated with persons from many different [non-Christian] traditions, that in the silence we experience a deep unity. When we go beyond the portals of the rational mind into the experience, there is only one God to be experienced.<sup>29</sup>

Gibbs and Bolger quote Emerging Church leader Spencer Burke:

"...the Christian tradition could hold to an inclusive model, not an exclusive one. We have a community hermeneutic. We read other sacred writings, then get back to Scripture and decide together how to interpret what we have read from the literature that other religions hold to be sacred."

Burke's community is prepared to learn from faith traditions outside the Christian fold. There is a Buddhist family in their church. As a community, the church visited a Buddhist temple. They participated in a guided meditation with this family. Burke celebrates the many ways God is revealed. He recognizes that the Spirit has been with these people all along. The community celebrates other traditions. They reach out to other traditions, and they see them as beloved children of God.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Keating calls the process of centering prayer "divine therapy." Why does he call it therapy? Because he believes that as your thoughts are stilled, the subconscious mind begins to "evacuate primitive experiences" ("unloading"), to continue quoting from the previously mentioned interview. As old painful memories surface, you are "to let them go" - these are the "false self" which prevents us from "union with God." Thinking about these "painful emotions" while you are learning "interior silence" is not advisable, "because you might lose your grounding and confidence in God." In the process of centering prayer, "the first experience of unloading is usually tears," also "dream patterns change," and "you may need the help of a therapist or a psychologically knowledgeable spiritual guide." "With some prudent bodily exercises like Thai chi, the energy tends to get balanced".<sup>31</sup> He states that the bad experiences that occur are "the purification of Freud's unconscious." "You are not thinking about God during the time of centering prayer, so you are giving God a chance to manifest." As the "spiritual journey" continues over a long period of time, the "true self," which is our "basic core of goodness" manifests itself, "spiritual progress" is made, and "divine union" occurs. "If you want to call this higher states of consciousness or if you want to call it advanced stages of faith, hope, and charity, that is up to you." But heed this caveat: "Centering prayer is very rich but quite diffuse and tends to put the emphasis on grace in a way that perhaps needs to be balanced by the Zen attitude, which is that we have to do something, too." **Does this sound like prayer to you?**

Centering prayer is indeed "therapy," but in no way could it be called "divine."

Father Keating goes on to say:

Most mainline Christians have a pretty monstrous idea of God that involves hell and punishment. If you feel that God is a judge, then you are ready to bring down the verdict of guilty for your least fault. We didn't know how to teach children religion, so we gave them the Commandments instead of fostering the idea of God as a loving father and protector who is merciful and who loves us. That is the good news of the gospel. I'm afraid we got into the habit in many Christian denominations of teaching the bad news first.

So what is the fruit of centering prayer for Thomas Keating, the originator of centering prayer? A belief that not talking to God is talking to God. A belief that sin is "the refusal to grow, to choose to stay as we are." A belief that the Law, which shows us our sin, convicts us, and points us to the Gospel, is a "monstrous idea." A belief that we can all achieve "divine union," regardless of religious belief. A belief that we can achieve

“divine union” by a psychological process, rather than being reborn by faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior. A belief that “we have to do something” to be saved.

The fruit of contemplative prayer is rotten. It is dead. It is infested with the swarming flies of false doctrine. There are many well-meaning Christians who are seeking God but are being lured away by Satan through this and other mystical practices. Jesus warns in Matthew Chapter 7:

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

The god described by contemplative prayer is a god made of wood and stone.

So why have I spent this much time on one narrow topic? Because contemplative prayer is a metaphor for all the mystical spiritual disciplines, and a metaphor for the Emerging Church's search for God through mystical means. No matter which mystical “means” you pick, the same rotten fruit is produced. Other mystical “means” embraced by the Emerging Church include:

- yoga, defined as

a school of Hindu philosophy advocating and prescribing a course of physical and mental disciplines for attaining liberation from the material world and union of the self with the Supreme Being or ultimate principle,<sup>32</sup>

and

- the labyrinth, another “mystical journey to spiritual fulfillment.”<sup>33</sup>

Mysticism has become a breeding ground for postmodern people who either refuse to acknowledge the inspired Word of God, seeking instead a god of their own making, or who have been led astray by false prophets.

### **Beyond Mysticism**

There is something even beyond mysticism, and that is *imagination*, the final frontier for the squeaking wheel portion of the Emerging Church. Community, story, experience, mysticism and the Bible have become fellow travelers on a journey of “imagination, and wondering, and thinking “what’s possible.”<sup>34</sup>

Here are several Emerging Church voices on the subject of imagination:

The “personalised” meaning or significance of church will increasingly be heard, seen, and discerned in peopled stories, in what is said and what is not said, in the dreams, the imaginings, the practices, and hopes of all who are the local expression of the “one...catholic and apostolic church.”<sup>35</sup>

to imagine and generate new possibilities for the Christian church in the postmodern world.<sup>36</sup>

We must imagine and pursue the development of new ways of being followers of Jesus, new ways of doing theology and living biblically, new understandings of mission, new ways of expressing compassion and seeking justice, new kinds of faith communities, new approaches to worship and service, new integrations and conversations and convergences and dreams.<sup>37</sup>

And Brian McLaren’s voice:

“We believe that image (the language of imagination) and emotion (including the emotion of wonder) are essential elements of fully human knowing, and thus we seek to integrate them in our search for this precious, wonderful, sacred gift called truth, which you and I both love - and too often betray in spite of our best intentions.”<sup>38</sup>

Finally, I’d like to quote ordained Episcopal priest Alan Jones, the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, because he exemplifies the ultimate heretical end of the mystical road. Father Jones is a postmodernist, and although I’d consider him to be on the fringe of the Emergent conversation, Brian McLaren apparently considers him a viable part of it, endorsing Alan’s book cover by saying “Alan Jones is a pioneer in reimagining a Christian faith that emerges from authentic spirituality. His work stimulates and encourages me deeply.” I can’t agree with Brian’s endorsement. Father Jones’ spirituality is a counterfeit spirituality. It appears that Father Jones’ mystical addiction has caused him to exchange the truth of God for a lie. Here are some of his thoughts from his book Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind:

When we begin to accept our inner plurality, we get less frightened of others who manifest a different tribal mix. Some of us feel that there is an emerging tribe—the global soul—that is able to see religion as a great work of the human imagination. Seeing it as a work of the imagination doesn’t make it any less true. Religion becomes a collective enterprise of cooperation between us and the unknown. Some of us identify the unknown with Spirit. Others leave it as the unknown. But we all participate in the same work of imagination.<sup>39</sup>

Reading his comments remind me of Ezekiel 13:1-3:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: `Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! (NIV)

Alan continues:

When we recover religion as a work of the imagination and are able to play with it in stories and myths, we wake up to the liberating fact that dogma isn't "eternal" but, like everything else, has a history.<sup>40</sup>

2 Timothy 4:3-4 also comes to mind:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Alan again continues:

I believe the Bible and the creeds but not literally, and I am no atheist....So Christianity as a set of beliefs doesn't work for me.<sup>41</sup>

The phrase "I am a practicing Christian but not a believing Christian" is extraordinarily wise.<sup>42</sup>

The other thread of just criticism addresses the suggestion implicit in the cross that Jesus' sacrifice was to appease an angry God. Penal substitution was the name of this vile doctrine. I don't doubt for one moment the power of sin and evil in the world or the power of sacrificial love as their antidote and the peculiar power of the cross as sign of forgiveness and restoration, but making God vengeful, all in the name of justice, has left thousands of souls deeply wounded and lost to the Church forever.<sup>43, 44</sup>

By calling the doctrine of substitutionary atonement a "vile doctrine," Alan Jones rejects the core of the Gospel. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus Christ went to the cross carrying your sin and mine. Without that pivotal essence, the Gospel is meaningless, salvation is lost, and you've reached the abyss at the end of the satanic mystical road.

Heading down that mystical road, some portions of the Emerging Church have lost sight of the Gospel. With mysticism and imagination reading the map, that's not hard to "imagine." It is the Gospel that will be the subject of *The Emerging Church, Part 5: Redefining the Gospel?*

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at: <http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.  
The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 230.
2. Frank Viola, "Will the Emerging Church Fully Emerge? " EmergingChurch.info, 2 Mar 2007 <<http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/frankviola/index.htm>>.
3. This quote was taken from page 25 in chapter 3, "Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and The Emerging Church," of R. Scott Smith's book Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005) in its pre-publication form, available here: <[http://members.tripod.com/carla\\_b/emergentmovement/rscottsmith.html](http://members.tripod.com/carla_b/emergentmovement/rscottsmith.html)>, 01 Mar 2007.
4. Spencer Burke, "From the Third Floor of the Garage: The Story of TheOOZE," TheOOZE.com, 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=827&page=3>>.
5. To see where Spencer Burke's mystical path has taken him, refer to his latest book, A Heretics Guide to Heaven. Theologian Scot McKnight reviewed the book in its pre-publication form. Having read other articles Scot has written on the Emerging Church, I'd have to say he's an Emerging sympathizer (he's on the Emergent Village Coordinating Group and he's got a "FRIEND OF emergent" logo pasted in the margin of his website). His review of Spencer's book, though, while trying to be charitable, is highly critical of Spencer's "bottom line." He calls Spencer a panentheist, states "...I see no reason to think he believes in the Trinity from reading this book," and "I see no reason in this book to think Spencer believes in the Gospel as the NT defines gospel..." although "Spencer told me on the phone that he thinks all are included in God's grace from the start solely because of Jesus' death and resurrection; why not write that in this book?"  
All four parts of Scot McKnight's review can be found at the following addresses:  
<<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1302>>  
<<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1311>>  
<<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1318>>  
<<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1319>>
6. "contemplative spirituality," Lighthouse Trails Research Project, 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/contemplativespirituality.htm>>.
7. Ray Yungen, A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting

- Christians with the World's Religions, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2006) 45.
8. Meditating on God's Word is a common theme in the Bible. To quote Pastor Don Matzat: "In contrast [to empty-headed meditation], when Christians meditate upon the Word of God, this does not involve maintaining a blank mind. Rather it means filling the mind with the Word of God."\* Psalm 119:15-16 reads "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word."  
\*Don Matzat, "Meditating Upon the Word of God," Issues, Etc. Journal, 1.7, May/June 1996, 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.issuesetc.org/resource/journals/v1n7.htm#Meditating%20Upon%20the%20Word%20of%20God>>.
  9. "mystical," Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2005, 01 Mar 2007 <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/mystical>>.
  10. Author unknown, The Cloud of Unknowing. This book may be viewed or downloaded from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous2/cloud.html>>.
  11. Thomas Keating, interview with Anne A. Simpson, "Resting in God...An Interview with Fr. Thomas Keating, OSCO," Common Boundary, Sep/Oct 1997, 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.livingrosaries.org/interview.htm>>.
  12. A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World's Religions, by Ray Yungen, is an excellent book to help sort out the interrelationship between such topics as contemplative prayer, the Desert Fathers, pantheism, yoga, the silence, eastern spirituality, demons, and the New Age. Mr. Yungen offers an in depth but easy to understand analysis, from a Christian perspective, to warn of the dangers of mysticism.
  13. For more on the contemplative spirituality of Tony Jones, refer to: Richard Bennett, "Emerging Church Indoctrinates with Catholic Style Eastern Mysticism," Berean Beacon Ministries, 02 Mar 2007 <[http://www.bereanbeacon.org/The\\_Emergent\\_Church\\_pdf/Emerging%20Church%20Indoctrinates%20Part%203.pdf](http://www.bereanbeacon.org/The_Emergent_Church_pdf/Emerging%20Church%20Indoctrinates%20Part%203.pdf)>.
  14. Keating interview.
  15. Elliot Miller, A Crash Course on the New Age Movement (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) Foreword by Walter Martin, 36-37.
  16. Russell Chandler, Understanding the New Age (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991, 1993) 27-28.
  17. "pantheism," Lighthouse Trails Research Project, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/glossary.htm>>.
  18. "The Issue of other Religious Practices as Worship in the Church," Let Us Reason Ministries, 03 Mar 2007 <<http://www.letusreason.org/current74.htm>>.
  19. Leonard Sweet, Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 1991) 63.  
Available for free download at: <<http://www.leonardsweet.com/Quantum/>>.
  20. Sweet, 65.
  21. Sweet, 12.
  22. Sweet, 63.
  23. Alan Jones, Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting

- Your Mind (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005) XVII-XVIII.
24. "Catholic Meditation or Occult Meditation," The Cross and the Veil, quote from "Love is God's Being" by M. Basil Pennington, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.crossveil.org/lectio.html>>.
25. Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, A is for Abductive? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 336. Thanks to Apologetics Index for pointing out this quote.
26. Ray Yungen, A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World's Religions, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2006) 22.
27. Brian D. McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am 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 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 198-199.
28. Sweet, 130-131.
29. Basil Pennington, Lighthouse Trail Research Project, quoted from Centered Living by Basil Pennington, 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/pennington.htm>>.
30. Gibbs and Bolger, 132.
31. The "energy" he is referring to is "kundalini energy," which is also called "serpent power." In the foreword to Philip St. Romain's book Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing, Thomas Keating offers this endorsement: "This book is the first description that I know of in Christian literature about the awakening of kundalini energy in a purely Christian context. Kundalini has long been known in Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist spirituality. The fact that this complete awakening occurred in the context of a classical development of Christian prayer makes it an important contribution to East/West dialogue. ...The awakening of kundalini energy and its various stages clearly enhances our understanding of how the body takes part in the spiritual journey." Shalom Place, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://www.shalomplace.com/view/kundalini.html#foreword>>.
- The American Heritage Dictionary defines kundalini as "Energy that lies dormant at the base of the spine until it is activated, as by the practice of yoga, and channeled upward through the chakras in the process of spiritual perfection."  
"kundalini," *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, 02 Mar 2007, Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/kundalini>>.
- Brian Flynn describes kundalini: "Symptoms can include headaches, nausea, tingling sensation, and uncontrollable twitching. The Sanskrit word Kundalini means the curled one, and is also called Kundalini awakening or the awakening of the serpent. Practitioners describe it as a curled channel in the tailbone area. It can rise through the chakras (psychic centers situated along the spine from the tailbone to the top of the head), creating physical symptoms ranging from sensations of heat and tremors to involuntary laughing or crying, nausea, diarrhea or constipation, rigidity or limpness, and animal-like movements and sounds."  
Brian Flynn, "The Kundalini Effect and Contemplative Prayer," One Truth Ministries, 24 Mar 2007 <<http://onetruthministries.com/KundaliniEffect.htm>>.

- [32.](#) “yoga.” Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 20 Feb 2007. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/yoga>>.
- [33.](#) Carl Teichrib, “The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path of Fulfillment?,” [SoundWitness.org](http://www.soundwitness.org), 20 Feb 2007 <[http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/the\\_labyrinth\\_journey.htm](http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/the_labyrinth_journey.htm)>.
- [34.](#) Doug Pagitt, “The Emergent Church and Postmodern Spirituality Debate,” CD-ROM, Session Two, Minneapolis, Twin City Fellowship, Jan 2006.
- [35.](#) Paul Fromont, “The ‘Body Art’ Of Emerging Church,” [TheOOZE.com](http://www.theooze.com), 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=591>>.
- [36.](#) Formerly on the Emergent Village website, [emergentvillage.org](http://emergentvillage.org).
- [37.](#) Formerly on the Emergent Village website, [emergentvillage.org](http://emergentvillage.org).
- [38.](#) Brian McLaren, “An Open Letter to Chuck Colson,” 02 Mar 2007 <<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000269.html>>.
- [39.](#) Jones, 24.
- [40.](#) Jones, 117.
- [41.](#) Jones, 31.
- [42.](#) Jones, 16.
- [43.](#) Jones, 168.
- [44.](#) This is the last time we’ll be hearing from Alan Jones. While there are those in the Emerging Church who share his repudiation of “penal substitution,” as we’ll see in Part 5, his is a position that some in the Emerging Church would reject. Although Brian McLaren is only a step or two behind Alan Jones’ theological footprints (at least on paper), I think there are those in the Emerging conversation that abhor some of what Alan Jones has to say as much as I do. While I abhor what Alan Jones has said, I pray for him. I pray that God will remove the scales from his eyes, so that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and a true knowledge of the Gospel.

***Sola Scriptura*** • ***Sola Gratia*** • ***Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 5: Redefining the Gospel?***

*by Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Parts one through four of this Emerging Church discussion were basically the groundwork for the next two parts, which discuss the Gospel message found in the Emerging Church. Part 1 included a review of modernism and postmodernism, plus an overview of the Emerging Church. Part 2 explored the Emerging Church's treatment of the Bible. Parts 3 and 4 examined experience and mysticism. When the Bible is put on an even normative plain with community, story, experience, mysticism, and imagination, biblical truth is often deconstructed, sometimes with disastrous results. Keep in mind that the Emerging conversation is a broad one, and not all of the participants will agree with the redefined "gospel" that is being proclaimed by some.

### **Establishing a Baseline**

In order to discuss the Gospel and at the same time be able to compare apples with apples, the Gospel will first be presented in its pre-deconstructed form.

The Gospel presented here is the historic, orthodox, readily discernible Gospel as found in Scripture. It is the reason I write. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

When people think of the Gospel, they generally think of a verse out of the New Testament, such as John 3:16. But the Gospel story begins long before the New Testament. It begins before the angelic announcement of a Savior in the book of Luke. It begins in the beginning, in the book of Genesis.

When God created Adam and Eve, he created them in His own image. But that image didn't last long. The perfect communion we had with God was destroyed when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. Our God-like image was ruined by the fall - we are sinners from conception, enemies of God, cast out of the garden. We are doomed to painful childbirth, toiling for food all the days of our lives, and death. Yet God had a plan to restore our communion with Him, through the promise of a Savior, Jesus Christ. That

promise is first seen in Genesis 3:15, “he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” That promise is foreshadowed and revisited throughout the Old Testament. It is promised through the Covenant God makes with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is foreshadowed when Abraham offers his son Isaac as a sacrifice. It is foreshadowed in the Passover, when the Israelites are miraculously brought out of Egypt, saved by the blood of a lamb painted on the lintels of their doors. It is foreshadowed by the scapegoat, who carries the sins of the Israelites into the desert to make atonement. It is prophesied throughout the Old Testament by the prophets.

As we arrive at the dawn of the New Testament, the time line resumes not with the birth of Jesus, but with the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist (in the book of Luke). John the Baptist came, significantly, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Man’s sin is the crux of the problem. God is a holy God - He does not tolerate sin. God’s just penalty for sin is death. The only way God could fulfill His promise of a Savior was to sacrifice “a lamb without blemish,” a sinless human being who would fulfill the Law and pay our penalty. The only way God could forgive each of us for our guilt and depravity was to offer up His only-begotten Son, who, being God, could intercede for each of us – a sacrifice of infinite value. Jesus became our scapegoat, carrying our sins to the cross, suffering the death penalty we deserve. In His bodily resurrection, He defeated sin, death, and the devil. He has gone to prepare a place for us, in heaven.

Jesus has not left us alone. He has given us His Holy Spirit, who works through the Word to preserve believers in the true faith, and to bring others to Christ, offering them His forgiveness, life, and salvation through the power of the Gospel message. He comes to all believers through Baptism, and through Holy Communion, renewing us daily. Which brings us full circle back to Jesus’ words in John 3:16-18:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

While God is love, he is also just. Those who reject the Gospel are condemned eternally to hell. God offers salvation to *all*, yet some refuse to believe.

Those who are saved by faith in Jesus as their Savior also deserve condemnation, but God sees them as holy because of Jesus substitutionary death and resurrection. God’s grace is *given* to believers, without any action or worthiness on their part. The Gospel truly is *good news*.

### **The “Other” Gospel of N. T. Wright**

Gibbs and Bolger remark in their pro-Emergent book Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures:

Rooted in the work of N. T. Wright, emerging churches embrace the gospel of the kingdom as revealed in Mark 1:15-16. At the outset of the Gospel narrative, the good news was not that Jesus was to die on the cross to forgive sins but that God had returned and all were invited to participate with him in this new way of life, in this redemption of the world. It is this gospel that the emerging church seeks to recover. As one [Emerging Church] leader confided privately, “We have totally reprogrammed ourselves to recognize the good news as a means to an end—that the kingdom of God is here. We try to live into that reality and hope. We don’t dismiss the cross; it is still a central part. But the good news is not that he died but that the kingdom has come.”<sup>1</sup>

N. T. Wright is an Anglican, the Bishop of Durham. Bishop Wright has in the past taken up evangelical causes, and is interesting to listen to, almost mesmerizing with his English accent. He leans towards the postmodern point of view. He is also one of a long list of scholars who over the last three quarters of a century have been gradually redefining the Gospel through a category of thought now called “The New Perspective on Paul.”<sup>2</sup>

Historically, according to New Perspective on Paul advocates, the Apostle Paul has been misrepresented by assigning to him too much of a Hellenistic “juridical” outlook, as opposed to a Jewish worldview. This bias has led to the wrong conclusions about Paul’s entire thrust in the New Testament, especially in Romans and Galatians. According to this perspective, the Jews did not seek “salvation” by “works of the law,” they were predominantly “grace” oriented. The term “works of the Law,” rather than meaning “works-righteousness” (salvation based on what you do, or works, rather than salvation based on grace, or what Jesus did), means only Jewish ceremonial laws (not the moral law). Their works of the law were the ethnic “badges” of the covenant, such as circumcision, Sabbath observation, and food laws, which marked the Jews as covenant members, not as works to attain covenant membership. Paul’s thrust is to convince the Jews that the Gentiles are now also welcomed covenant members through faith in Christ, without any ethnic badges.

Since the Jews were not trying to save themselves based on works, according to the New Perspective on Paul, other New Testament concepts have now morphed into foreign meanings as well. For instance, the meaning of the term “the righteousness of God,” which by Reformation standards means a sinner being clothed in Christ’s righteousness by grace through faith, is incorrect. The real meaning of “the righteousness of God” is God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel. Thus N. T. Wright can say “What Paul means by justification...is not ‘how you become a Christian’, so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family’.”<sup>3</sup> “Christ has fulfilled the covenant purposes, bringing them to their God-ordained climax, which was always to deal with sin and so to set in motion the renewal of the whole cosmos.”<sup>4</sup>

Sin, by N. T. Wright's way of thinking, is not the "original sin" that each of us is conceived with, which is an affront to God and merits the death penalty. Rather than being forgiven and reborn, Wright would have it that we are liberated from the *effect* of sin, enabling us to become the truly human beings we were meant to be. Sin, for the Gentiles, meant worshiping idols and declaring *Caesar* as Lord, a general rejection of *Jesus* as Lord. Sin for the Jews, meant pursuing their own political ends, whether it meant political subversiveness and plotting against the Romans, or political appeasement. It meant a refusal of Israel to be the light of the world. Jesus came not to die on the cross carrying our sin, to *atone* for our sin, but to undo the corruption of the material world that was brought on by Adam and Eve's indiscretion.<sup>5</sup> "...The reason God established the covenant with Abraham, according to scripture in general and Paul in particular, was to undo the sin of Adam and its effects and thereby to complete the project of the good creation itself."<sup>6</sup> "Justification is ultimately about justice, about God putting the world to rights, with this chosen and called people as the advance guard of that new creation, charged with being and bringing signs of hope, of restorative justice, to the world."<sup>7</sup>

We are thus all invited to participate in God's restoration project of the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> This line of reasoning causes Gibbs and Bolger to proclaim and quote:

the good news was not that Jesus was to die on the cross to forgive sins but that God had returned and all were invited to participate with him in this new way of life, in this redemption of the world.<sup>9</sup>

and

But the good news is not that he died but that the kingdom has come.<sup>10</sup>

N. T. Wright ultimately claims:

'The gospel' is not 'you can be saved, and here's how'; the gospel, for Paul, is 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.<sup>11</sup>

His proclamation has huge repercussions for the Gospel - it has been redefined. It is now a re-creation project, started by acknowledging "Jesus is Lord." Gone is original sin, repentance, judgment, and the need for a Savior who is crucified for your sin and my sin, so that we might stand in holiness before the throne of God.<sup>12, 13</sup> God's grace now consists of our election into the covenant, and our forgiveness is by default "assured" by covenant membership, thereby eliminating the doctrine of the atonement.<sup>14</sup> "Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something someone 'performs' as a kind of initiation test."<sup>15</sup> To further compound this theological mess, as Rev. Richard Phillips points out, Bishop Wright states:

"Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance." ...We are

justified by faith in the present, but justification “occurs in the present as an anticipation of that future verdict, which is according to works”.<sup>16</sup> [Rev. Phillips’ emphasis]

Bishop Wright further reinforces his heretical claim:

“...God’s final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led – in accordance, in other words, with works.”<sup>17</sup>

This proposition is nothing more than synergism dressed up in a “grace” Halloween costume. It doesn’t take a lot of Scriptural head-scratching to disprove his theological theorem. One verse will do:

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Romans 11:6

Or Galatians 3:3:

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

If N. T. Wright has it his way, we have no assurance. How many works are enough? We will immediately abandon Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross in search of the right combination of works to secure our own salvation. Bishop Wright has destroyed the material principle of the Church, the central doctrine of all Christianity, *justification by grace through faith*.<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther called this doctrine “...the head and cornerstone of the Church, which alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and protects the Church; without it the Church of God cannot subsist one hour.”<sup>19</sup>

By rejecting justification by faith and the atonement, N. T. Wright is rejecting God’s entire plan of salvation and instead turning it into another works-based man-made religion, with salvation resting on your own shoulders. The New Perspective on Paul has Satan’s fingerprints all over it. What better way to deceive people than to switch the real Gospel with a similar-sounding false one using the same terms but with different meanings.

I doubt that Gibbs and Bolger’s blanket statement that the Emerging Church is “Rooted in the work of N. T. Wright” is entirely accurate, although it’s definitely representative of the “squeaking wheel” of the Emerging Church. There are people participating in the “conversation” that haven’t given up on justification by grace through faith. That being said, however, the shadow of N. T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul is a long one. The same themes and phraseology that are endemic in N. T. Wright’s speaking and writing come up with amazing regularity in the Emerging Church;

themes such as: the kingdom of God, justice, new possibilities, culturally interpreted stories, the renewal of creation, new heavens and new earth, the implementing of God's future, God and the world in a deep and loving relationship, and a world in which justice and peace overflow.

Bishop Wright touts his redefined gospel as having solved the “preaching the gospel” / “social gospel” dichotomy, but he has presented us with nothing more than another social gospel.<sup>20</sup> Here is his final “sermon text”:

...there is a different way of being human, a way characterized by self-giving love, by justice, by honesty, and by the breaking down of the traditional barriers that reinforce the divisions which keep human beings separate from, and as often as not at odds with, one another.<sup>21</sup>

It is a familiar text, one that is devoid of the forgiveness found through the atonement – it is a “different Gospel.” It is a text that patterns itself after the Social Gospel, the topic of our next discussion, *The Emerging Church, Part 6: A Social Gospel?*

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at: <http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 54.
2. Phil Johnson, in his seminar presentation entitled “What’s Wrong with Wright: Examining the New Perspective on Paul,” presents a good overview of the New Perspective on Paul:  
Phil Johnson, “What’s Wrong with Wright: Examining the New Perspective on Paul,” Shepherds’ Conference, Grace Community Church, Los Angeles, 4 Mar 2005, at [gracechurch.org](http://gracechurch.org), 26 Mar 2007  
<<http://www.thegracelifepulpit.com/articles/wrongwithwright.pdf>>.
3. N. T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 122.
4. Wright, Saint Paul, 131.
5. Here are two quotes which embody N. T. Wright’s errant views on the significance of the cross:  
“Easter is about the renewal of creation, renewal of the cosmos, into which we are introduced, like the disciples frightened and not knowing what is going on. If we reduce it to a message of me and my new spirituality, we’ve only got ourselves to blame if people say it probably didn’t happen, it was just an idea in the minds of the disciples.”\*  
“We look back to the decisive event of Jesus and his cross and resurrection, we look on to God’s promise, which is not, not, not as I said yesterday that we will all

go to heaven when we die in some disembodied platonic faraway place, but that God will make new heavens and new earth in which true justice will dwell. That's the biblical promise.”\*\*

\*N. T. Wright, “God’s Future for the World has Arrived in the Person of Jesus,” Future of the People of God Conference, Open Source Theology, Hothorpe Hall, Leicestershire, U.K., 14 Jul 2004, at [opensourcetheology.net](http://opensourcetheology.net), 26 Mar 2007 <<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/talks>>.

\*\*N. T. Wright, “Reimagining Our Mission as God’s Agents of New Creation in the World,” Future of the People of God Conference, Open Source Theology, Hothorpe Hall, Leicestershire, U.K., 15 July 2004, at [opensourcetheology.net](http://opensourcetheology.net), 26 Mar 2007 <<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/talks>>.

6. N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 10<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, Rutherford House, Edinburgh, Aug 2003, 13, at [ntwrightpage.com](http://ntwrightpage.com), 26 Feb 2007 <[http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_New\\_Perspectives.pdf](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.pdf)> .

7. Wright, *New Perspectives*, 17.

8. I am not arguing that we shouldn’t seek justice, or be good stewards of God’s creation. The Emerging Church, however, places an undue emphasis on these “restoration” themes at the expense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Justice* is a function of the Law, not the Gospel. They also place undue emphasis on the theme of a literal “new earth” at the expense of the thematic biblical emphasis of a *spiritual* “new earth” in which sinners are reborn, the focus of the Gospel.

9. Gibbs and Bolger, 54.

10. Gibbs and Bolger, 54.

11. Wright, *New Perspectives*, 5.

12. N. T. Wright essentially replaces “judgment” with “fixing the world.” The threat of judgment day has been removed. Language alluding to a final judgment, in which believers receive eternal life in heaven and unbelievers receive eternal damnation in hell, is removed, in favor of a “kinder, gentler” (and false) approach. Instead of a final judgment for sin, N. T. Wright frequently speaks of “God putting the world to rights.” Referring to Acts 17:31, a verse which clearly refers to the final judgment, he substitutes judgment with renewal of the cosmos, or putting the world to right: “He [God] has fixed a day on which he will ‘put the world to right’. You know we only hear the word ‘judge the world,’ here ‘put it to rights by a man whom he has appointed.’ ”

N. T. Wright, “Understanding and Implementing Jesus’ Gospel in the Present,” Future of the People of God Conference, Open Source Theology, Hothorpe Hall, Leicestershire, U.K., 14 July 2004, at [opensourcetheology.net](http://opensourcetheology.net), 26 Mar 2007 <<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/talks>>.

13. On page 41 of *What Saint Paul Really Said*, N. T. Wright says: “In the present case, I am perfectly comfortable with what people normally mean when they say ‘the gospel’. I just don’t think it is what Paul means. In other words, I am not denying that the usual meanings are things that people ought to say, to preach about, to believe. I simply wouldn’t use the word ‘gospel’ to denote those things.” It is difficult to reconcile his statement with his position, since he denies the atonement and justification by faith. He occasionally makes statements like this one, but they *always* take a similar form, not in the form of a proclamation, but always in the form of an afterthought or a disclaimer to blunt the criticism of would-be objectors.

14. N. T. Wright specifically denies that Paul speaks of the atonement: “Paul does not say that he sees us clothed with the earned merits of Christ. That would of course be the wrong meaning of ‘righteous’ or ‘righteousness’. He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ, that is, as having died with Christ and risen again with him” (New Perspectives, 14). While Bishop Wright states that God’s vindication of someone is “their sins having been forgiven through the death of Jesus” (New Perspectives, 12), Jesus in no way atones for their sin. Instead, in Jesus death and resurrection “the one God of all the world has been true to his word, has dealt decisively with the evil that has invaded his creation, and is now restoring justice, peace and truth” (Saint Paul, 109).
15. Wright, Saint Paul, 125.
16. Richard Phillips, “Covenant Confusion,” Greenville Seminary Spring Theology Conference/Philadelphia Conference on Reformation Theology, 2004, quoting from Wright’s *The Letter to the Roman’s in the New Interpreters Bible*,” at *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*, 26 Feb 2007 <[http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0..PTID307086%7CCHID559376%7CCIID1787572.00.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0..PTID307086%7CCHID559376%7CCIID1787572.00.html)>.
17. Wright, New Perspectives, 8.
18. Justification by grace through faith is not just a Pauline doctrine as N. T. Wright might lead you to believe. It was also taught by Jesus (see Matthew 20:28 and 26:28), and by the Old Testament prophets: “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).
19. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950) 515.
20. On page 153-4 of *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Bishop Wright states: “Paul’s gospel must, I believe, be reinstated at the very centre of the church’s preaching. The gospel is not, as I have stressed, a set of techniques for making people Christians. Nor is it a set of systematic theological reflections, however important. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord - Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, of the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises. As soon as we get this right we destroy at a stroke the disastrous dichotomy that has existed in people’s minds between ‘preaching the gospel’ on the one hand and what used to be called loosely ‘social action’ or ‘social justice’ on the other. Preaching the gospel means announcing Jesus as Lord of the world....” In his “New Perspectives on Paul” lecture, Bishop Wright states: “...it follows at once that justification is the original *ecumenical* doctrine. ...Once we relocate justification, moving it from the discussion of how people become Christians to the discussion of how we know that someone is a Christian, we have a powerful incentive to work together across denominational barriers” (New Perspectives, 15). N. T. Wright presents “preaching the gospel” and the social Gospel as a false dichotomy, but his redefinition of the Gospel merely adds another chapter to the social Gospel canon. He also presents a straw man argument. The historic church has not created a dichotomy. To quote Lutheran pastor Harold L. Senkbeil: “Liturgy always empowers mission, and mission always leads back to liturgy. There’s no separating the liturgical life of the church from the mission of the church; they are organically one piece.” Harold L. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994) 135.

[21.](#) Wright, Saint Paul, 154.

***Sola Scriptura*** • ***Sola Gratia*** • ***Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 6: A Social Gospel?***

*by Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

In Part 5 of our discussion on the Emerging Church, we reviewed the orthodox “definition” of the Gospel. If you missed it, hopefully you’ll go back and read it, since it has great applicability for our current discussion. We also reviewed the impact that N. T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul have had on Emergent thinking. The New Perspective on Paul has redefined the Gospel so that it only vaguely resembles the orthodox Gospel which is based on justification by grace through faith. The New Perspective on Paul, while using much of the same terminology, has assigned new meanings to many of those same terms. They have turned the Gospel into a “different gospel,” one that reads like a “Social Gospel,” the topic in this part of our discussion.

### **The Social Gospel in the Emerging Church**

The Emerging Church places great emphasis on being missional, one description of which is:

...to embrace a holistic gospel - it is for the whole person (heart, soul, mind, and strength), for the whole society (politics, economy, culture, environment), and for the whole world. ...the mission is the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus, ...to let others see the gospel in action.<sup>1</sup> The gospel is to be performed as well as proclaimed.<sup>2, 3</sup>

The following quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi has been mentioned by several Emerging authors: “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” Part of their missional emphasis in sharing the good news is in avoiding a phony sounding “canned sales pitch” form of the Gospel, which is commendable, but the solution is frequently to “live” the Gospel while downplaying or omitting its proclamation:

We want to help people consider Jesus as an option through the beauty of how we live our lives. Living in the way of Jesus is not a belief system but a reality. We believe in an “inhabited apologetic,” and through our lives “we

bear witness to the reality of God.”<sup>4</sup>

For Scandrette [an Emerging Church leader], there are no mission projects or outreaches. Their daily lives point to the reality of the kingdom. Through their activities in the community, members preach good news.<sup>5</sup>

...we now have a bunch of new friends whom we see out and about and hang out with. They know we are Christians, and they see how we live. For us, that is evangelism.<sup>6, 7</sup>

Part of this lack of emphasis on speaking the Gospel may be intertwined with the erroneous belief that living in “the way of Jesus” will somehow change beliefs and create Christians, here illustrated by Emerging Church leader Doug Pagitt:

Pagitt believes that the old view perpetuated the idea that changed ideas (conversion) lead to changed behavior. Pagitt believes, however, that a changed life (conversion) leads to changed beliefs. “We are much more involved in inviting them to live differently than to believe differently.”<sup>8, 9</sup>

Gibbs and Bolger mention:

Emerging churches focus on changed lives rather than changed beliefs. People do not want to be converted, but experiencing the life of the kingdom may be welcomed by many. The focus is to create cultures of the kingdom and to allow God to do the work.<sup>10</sup>

If this is your sole method of witnessing, it is contrary to the method laid out by Scripture for two reasons. First, it is only through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, that people come to faith in Jesus as their Savior.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Romans 10:17

Second, before a person becomes a Christian no amount of “changed life” will ever lead to conversion:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:14

When there *is* a verbal message given, it is often couched in Christian-sounding phrases, but it *usually* confuses Law and Gospel. The condemnatory function of the

Law (the second use of the Law, as a mirror) and repentance are omitted, and are replaced by what appears to be a Gospel presentation emphasizing love, but is actually Law in “works” form (the third use of the Law, as a guide). It becomes a “Social Gospel”:

...the purpose of the church—at least, of the post-Protestant church in our way of thinking—is to spiritually form people to love God and others and themselves so that they can live life to the full in God’s kingdom, in the way of Jesus. We want to change the world, but that requires people who learn to be the revolution they want to see in the world.<sup>11</sup>

At first glance, the quote of Brian McLaren above appears to be orthodox, but following its line of thinking will lead to spiritual death. The purpose of the Church is to continually and unceasingly proclaim both Gospel *and* Law. The Law comes first. Through the preaching of the Law, the Holy Spirit causes us to despair of the righteous demands of God – demands we can never fulfill. We are caused to see the hopelessness of our condition. Through the preaching of the Gospel, in faith we realize those demands are met for us by Jesus Christ. It would initially appear in the above quote that Brian McLaren has completely skipped the Law, and he *has* failed to *point out* the accusatory aspect of the Law, but that omission is only part of the problem. The “Gospel” he presents above is actually Law, the same Law that condemns us.

The Emerging Church often presents the Gospel as a sort of “walking” Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus did indeed say to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40) – but His teaching here is *Law, not Gospel*. It is a summary of the two tables of the Law.<sup>12, 13</sup> When Brian speaks of love, instead of preaching the Gospel, he unwittingly demands that you keep the Law, but without offering a means of doing so. Those unbelievers who chose his path have no hope of salvation. This point is so important that it’s going to be reiterated a couple more times.

When Brian McLaren tells people “to love God and others and themselves so that they can live life to the full in God’s kingdom,” he’s telling you what you should *do*. *That is the function of the Law*. Romans 13:10 says “love is the fulfilling of the law.” The Gospel, on the other hand, tells you not what *you* should do, but what *Christ* has done *for you*. It is what Christ does for you that offers salvation. In choosing the Law, rather than the Gospel, you are attempting to save yourself based on works, a fatal decision:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written,  
"Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of  
the Law, and do them."

Galatians 3:10

This curse is just as sure as the promise offered in John 3:16. It is no joking matter. It cannot be taken lightly.

Once more:

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:4

The love of God and our neighbor comes *only* through faith in the life-giving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:10

Our entire life as Christians is wrapped up not in our love for God, but in His love for us, and in what He has done and continues to do for us. He comes to us daily in Word and Sacrament, forgiving our sin for Christ's sake, and renewing our hearts. And He works through us. It is in God's work in and through us that we are enabled to love our neighbor and serve our fellow man. The Law shows us what we should do, but it is the Gospel which enables us to do so (though never perfectly, since we are still sinners). What a blessing and a mystery that God chooses to work through us, being simultaneously sinner and saint. As Christians, our lives are entirely in Christ, so much so that Paul was able to say "to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

2 Corinthians 4:5-7

Recognizing the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is absolutely essential. The "good news" which Brian McLaren proclaims is very enticing to the unbeliever. The sinful human nature knows and recognizes the Law – it knows nothing of the Gospel. Brian's overture to live life "in the way of Jesus" is as attractive to an unrepentant sinner as the light of an electric bug zapper is to an insect. The soft glow of the bug zapper seems very inviting in the night air, but its results are deadly. The Law without the indwelling of the Gospel has the same deadly result. Its justice is swift and final. Our

salvation, daily renewal, and good works are dependent not on what we do, but on what Jesus Christ has done and continues to do as He offers forgiveness, life, and salvation through His means of grace.

### **Other Characteristics of the Social Gospel**

While the Emerging Church attempts to “incarnate” the kingdom of God, some are actually turning the kingdom of God into the world:

Sanctuary [an Emerging Church] adopted the Jesus of popular culture, not the church, as they felt the church’s view ignored the life of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

We invite you to join with us in pursuing the dreams and love of God for the world in the way of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The Social Gospel, refusing to acknowledge the depravity of our sinful nature, invariably sees people as inherently good:

By encouraging the creative spark that is implanted in each person by virtue of the fact that all are made in the image of God, emerging churches hope to reconnect people with their true selves.<sup>16</sup>

...the clarion call of the emerging church is Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it” (NIV). For emerging churches, there are no longer any bad places, bad people, or bad times. All can be made holy. All can be given to God in worship. All modern dualisms can be overcome.<sup>17</sup>

God makes us in his image. We reflect the beauty and creativity and wonder of the God who made us. And Jesus calls us to return to our true selves. The pure, whole people God originally intended us to be, before we veered off course.

Somewhere in you is the you whom you were made to be.

We need you to be you.

We don’t need a second anybody. We need the first you.<sup>18</sup>

When Nicodemus came to Jesus with searching questions, Jesus didn’t tell him to reconnect with his “true self,” or to look inward for “the you whom you were made to be.” In fact, *He told him the exact opposite*. He told him he needed to be *reborn* (John 3:1-21).

Rob Bell, in his book Velvet Elvis mentions an unbeliever who attended their gatherings. He ventures that “God loves her exactly as she is.”<sup>19</sup> Until we are reborn through the Gospel, until our sins are forgiven through Jesus’ death on the cross, God doesn’t love us exactly as we are. Before our rebirth, we are enemies of God and

objects of God's wrath:

among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians 2:3

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Romans 5:9-10

A little cosmetic surgery to amend our habits will not redeem our sinful nature. The "true self" whom many in the Emerging Church attempt to revive should not be resuscitated. This is one corpse whose medical ID bracelet needs to be labeled *DNR – Do Not Resuscitate*. Only through the death of our "former selves" are we alive in Christ, a distinction which some in the Emerging Church fail to make – turning the Gospel into a Social Gospel.

The Christian Encyclopedia defines the Social Gospel as:

Teaching of a social salvation whose objective is rebirth of society through change of the social order by mass or group action. Tries to persuade individuals to practice the social ethics of Jesus. Makes little or no reference to reconciliation with God through Christ and to the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. For many it is essentially a this-worldly gospel of works, not a Gospel of grace for this life and heaven... Critics of the Social Gospel see in it an idealistic, purely humanitarian, falsely optimistic, utopian and pacifistic, social reformist movement not essentially Christian (since it bypasses essential elements of Christian doctrine and life).<sup>20</sup>

The "gospel of works" portion of this definition can be clearly seen from the previous quotes. "Living in the way of Jesus" is not about saving faith - it's about works. Changed life without changed beliefs is a gospel of works. Living differently is about works. Seeking salvation by rediscovering "the first you" rejects the rebirth offered through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross - again a gospel of works, and a gospel of death.<sup>21</sup>

The entire sense of the above definition is illustrated in this quote of Brian McLaren:

Even if only a few would practice this new way, many would benefit. Oppressed people would be free. Poor people would be liberated from poverty. Minorities would be treated with respect. Sinners would be loved,

not resented. Industrialists would realize that God cares for sparrows and wildflowers—so their industries should respect, not rape, the environment....The kingdom of God would come....<sup>22, 23</sup>

The following quotes illustrate the “this-worldly gospel of works” portion of the Social Gospel definition:

But now I wonder if this gospel about how to get your soul into Heaven after death is really only a ghost of the real gospel that Jesus talked about, which seemed to have something to do with God’s will being done on earth now, not just in Heaven later.<sup>24</sup>

Instead, the gospel is about being increasingly alive to God in the world. It is concerned with bringing heaven to earth. This really throws people off.<sup>25</sup>

True spirituality then is not about escaping this world to some other place where we will be forever. A Christian is not someone who expects to spend forever in heaven there. A Christian is someone who anticipates spending forever here, in a new heaven that comes to earth.

The goal isn’t escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work.<sup>26</sup>

Along with bringing heaven to earth, the Social Gospel redefines hell, again muting the Law’s condemning nature. Brian McLaren has been working hard to redefine hell as something that better fits the Social Gospel message, as the following three quotes show:

...the conventional doctrine of hell has too often engendered a view of a deity who suffers from borderline personality disorder or some worse sociopathic diagnosis. *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.*<sup>27</sup>

We need to go back and take another look at Jesus’ teachings about hell. For so many people, the conventional teaching about hell makes God seem vicious. That’s not something we should let stand.<sup>28</sup>

This book, in a sense, attempts to deconstruct our conventional concepts of hell in the sincere hope that a better vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ will appear.<sup>29</sup>

Rob Bell’s solution is to reduce hell to little more than a nuisance and relocate it to here on earth:

When people use the word hell, what do they mean? They mean a place, an event, a situation absent of how God desires things to be. Famine, debt, oppression, loneliness, despair, death, slaughter - they are all hell on earth.<sup>30</sup>

When hell and the condemnatory aspect of the Law are missing, the import of the Gospel is lost.

Gibbs and Bolger report on how Emerging Churches came to emphasize the gospel of the kingdom: "With a growing conviction that something was seriously wrong with the church, these emerging leaders felt they needed a fresh understanding of the gospel to proceed any further."<sup>31</sup> The fresh understanding they came up with was a culturally defined Jesus.

Adopting the Jesus of popular culture results in a popular message, the Social Gospel. Those who promulgate a Social Gospel in the Emerging Church have a serious problem with their message. Emerging Church pastor Karen Ward says "The cultural view 'gets' that Jesus was for the marginalized and the oppressed."<sup>32</sup> What the culture does not "get" and can not "get" is that **Jesus came for sinners**. Jesus came primarily to atone for our sin:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

1 Timothy 1:15

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

1 Peter 3:18

We need more than a role model, someone to come along and show us a better way to live. We need someone who can forgive sins, someone who can mediate between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. A watered down "Gospel" that ignores sin, repentance, and the basic tenets of Christianity results in a hell-bound unforgiven sinner. Those who truly become Christians while being fed the milk of a Social Gospel will do so in spite of what they are taught, not because of it. Sadly, many people who are "living in the way of Jesus" believe they are Christians but are not.

Joel McClure, one of the pastors at Water's Edge, an Emerging church, says: "The gospel is that God wants you to help solve that problem [what's wrong with the world],

to participate with God through redeeming acts.”<sup>33</sup> The world’s problem is *sin*. The redemptive act that we most need to participate in is the one that was accomplished on the cross, in which Jesus bore God’s wrath in His body.

God is both a wrathful God and a loving God. He rages against sin, yet at the same time He became incarnate as a man to be sin for us. God’s wrath is not a terrible thing that we need to redefine - through it we are made aware of our sin and our need for a Savior. He graciously sets aside His rightful wrath through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, for Jesus’ sake. It is through our faith in Jesus and *His work* on the cross that we are led to a “better life.” We are led to a life of forgiveness under the cross. We are led to daily nourishment through Word and Sacrament. Christ Jesus comes to us each day by His Spirit through the Word to offer His forgiveness. Christ Jesus comes to us through bread and wine to offer His body and blood for our forgiveness. We are forgiven each day as we remember our Baptism and repent. We hold on to the promises offered us in the Gospel. As we rise each morning, our minds are renewed. The peace of God, which transcends all human understanding, guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. We go into the world able to serve our fellow man and joyfully proclaim the Gospel through Word and deed with one singular focus, to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

A prayer is offered up for those in the Emerging Church, both leaders and followers, that they would hallow the orthodox Gospel of justification by grace through faith, hold fast to the objective, external knowledge of God found only in the Word, and maintain a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Do not be enticed to adopt the Jesus of popular culture. Remember the words of St. Paul:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:8-12

I’d like to close this part by quoting a hymn whose text was written by Paul Speratus. It’s one of my favorites because it does such a great job of teaching Law and Gospel.

- 1      Salvation unto us has come  
           By God's free grace and favor;  
 Good works cannot avert our doom,  
           They help and save us never.  
 Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,  
           Who did for all the world atone;  
           He is our one Redeemer.
- 2      What God did in His Law demand  
           And none to Him could render  
 Caused wrath and woe on ev'ry hand  
           For man, the vile offender.  
 Our flesh has not those pure desires  
           The spirit of the Law requires,  
           And lost is our condition.
- 3      It was a false, misleading dream  
           That God His Law had given  
 That sinners could themselves redeem  
           And by their works gain heaven.  
 The Law is but a mirror bright  
           To bring the inbred sin to light  
           That lurks within our nature.
- 4      From sin our flesh could not abstain,  
           Sin held its sway unceasing;  
 The task was useless and in vain,  
           Our guilt was e'er increasing.  
 None can remove sin's poisoned dart  
           Or purify our guileful heart—  
           So deep is our corruption.
- 5      Yet as the Law must be fulfilled  
           Or we must die despairing,  
 Christ came and has God's anger stilled,  
           Our human nature sharing.  
 He has for us the Law obeyed  
 And thus the Father's vengeance stayed  
           Which over us impended.
- 6      Since Christ has full atonement made  
           And brought to us salvation,  
 Each Christian therefore may be glad  
           And build on this foundation.  
 Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,  
           Your death is now my life indeed,  
           For You have paid my ransom.
- 7      Let me not doubt, but truly see  
           Your Word cannot be broken;  
 Your call rings out, "Come unto Me!"  
           No falsehood have You spoken.  
 Baptized into Your precious name,  
           My faith cannot be put to shame,  
           And I shall never perish.
- 8      The Law reveals the guilt of sin  
           And makes us conscience-stricken;  
 But then the Gospel enters in  
           The sinful soul to quicken.  
 Come to the cross, trust Christ, and live;  
           The Law no peace can ever give,  
           No comfort and no blessing.
- 9      Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone  
           And rests in Him unceasing;  
 And by its fruits true faith is known,  
           With love and hope increasing.  
 For faith alone can justify;  
 Works serve our neighbor and supply  
           The proof that faith is living.
- 10     All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise  
           To Father, Son, and Spirit,  
 The God who saved us by His grace;  
           All glory to His merit.  
 O triune God in heav'n above,  
 You have revealed Your saving love;  
 Your blessed name we hallow.<sup>34</sup>

Coming up in *The Emerging Church, Part 7: Sheep Without a Shepherd*, an exploration of the effects postmodernism and the abandonment of Scriptural authority have had on Emerging Church pastors.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at:  
<http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. The Emerging Church's definition of the kingdom of God generally follows Doug Pagitt's definition: "You are going to be the people who are the inhabitants of the kingdom of God. The ways of God, the life of God, the activity of God. You are going to be those people. And when you take on this life of God in the world, then you're living as the people of God. Later in the New Testament I think the phrase is you become the body of Christ. That you are the people who are living out the hopes and dreams and aspirations of God in this world because God is active in it and you are joining with God." Emergents often refer to themselves as *incarnating* the kingdom of God.  
Doug Pagitt, "The Emergent Church and Postmodern Spirituality Debate," CD-ROM, Session Two, Minneapolis, Twin City Fellowship, Jan 2006.
2. Scot McKnight, Jesus Creed, 3 Nov 2005, 27 Feb 2007 <<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?m=200511&paged=5>>.
3. Part of the Emerging Church protest includes the mainline church's propensity to "bog down" under a plethora of intra-church events and committee meetings, to the exclusion of any mission emphasis, which is at times an accurate assessment. Their emphasis on serving the poor and homeless is great, but at the same time it tends towards pietism when it lacks a sacramental theology. It is not just the downtrodden that we are to serve. God works through us using ordinary means as we bless our fellow man through our various vocations. As we willingly fulfill our obligations as fathers, spouses, sisters, employers, employees, God is working through us, and we serve Him in these areas just as much as when we volunteer to serve at the local soup kitchen.
4. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 58; quoting Mark Scandrette of ReIMAGINE! in San Francisco.
5. Gibbs and Bolger, 59; quoting Anna Dodridge.
6. Gibbs and Bolger, 80.
7. Emerging Church leader Rob Bell takes this type of thought to the next level: "Oftentimes the Christian community has sent the message that we love people and build relationships in order to convert them to the Christian faith. So there is an agenda. And when there is an agenda, it isn't really love, is it?"  
Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 167.
8. Gibbs and Bolger, 129.
9. I am not discounting the witness we present to unbelievers through our behavior as Christians. To quote Dr. Robert Kolb: "Christian witness can happen in any situation. The Holy Spirit can use a hit-and-run speaking of his Word to good effect. But normally the Gospel is most easily heard, humanly speaking, when believers have created a climate of trust in a relationship with the unbeliever. Although they will not (as the song states) 'know we are Christians by our love'—for unbelievers often love very effectively—our love builds a foundation on which speaking the Gospel can be built."  
Robert Kolb, The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition (St. Louis: Concordia,

- 1993) 213.
10. Gibbs and Bolger, 128-129.
  11. Brian McLaren's fictional character Dr. Ruth Mitchell. Brian D. McLaren, The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 141.
  12. The Ten Commandments are divided into two parts, or tables. The first table, consisting of the first three commandments, summarizes our duty to God. The second table, consisting of the last seven commandments, summarizes our duty to our fellow man.
  13. It should come as no surprise that unbelievers would gravitate to the Law. To quote Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper: "Since the heathen know nothing of the Gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 2:6-10: 'neither have entered into the heart of man'), but have some knowledge of the Law (Rom. 1:32: 'knowing the judgment of God'; Rom. 2:15: 'work of the Law written in their hearts'), their entire religious thinking moves in the sphere of the Law. Religion to the heathen means man's endeavor to placate the deity through his own efforts and works, through worship, sacrifices, moral exercises, ascetic discipline, and the like. The religion of the heathen is therefore a religion of the Law." Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950) 8.
  14. Gibbs and Bolger, 48.
  15. Solomon's Porch homepage, 27 Feb 2007 <<http://www.solomonsporch.com/>>.
  16. Gibbs and Bolger, 237.
  17. Gibbs and Bolger, 67.
  18. Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 150.
  19. Bell, 90.
  20. "Social Gospel," Christian Cyclopedia, Erwin L. Leuker, et. al., eds, Concordia Publishing House, 2000, 27 Feb 2007 <[http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_display.asp?t1=S&word=SOCIALGOSPEL](http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/_____display.asp?t1=S&word=SOCIALGOSPEL)>.
  21. I am not arguing that we should not do good works, or downplaying that aspect of a Christian's life. Works are necessary - they flow naturally from the life of a Christian, and are evidence of our faith. God works through us to benefit our fellow man by our good works. Before God, however, our standing is based solely on faith, completely apart from works.
  22. Bob DeWaay, "Emergent Delusion: A Critique of *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren," Critical Issues Commentary, Twin City Fellowship, Mar/Apr 2005, No. 87, p. 5, quoting McLaren from A Generous Orthodoxy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 121-122, 27 Feb 2007 <<http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue87.pdf>>.
  23. Pastor Bob DeWaay calls this type of thinking a version of "liberation theology" (DeWaay, 5). I think it's safe to say that Pastor Ken Silva would call it "the old Social Gospel of what Dr. Walter Martin referred to as 'the Cult of Liberal Theology.'"\* The Christian Cyclopedia states: "Liberal theology held that the function of the church was to establish the kingdom of God as an ethical and moral community. Since such a kingdom could not be established until the social ideals of Jesus had permeated all human society, liberal theology invented the social gospel."\*\*  
\*Ken Silva, "Emerging With the Social Gospel," Apprising Ministries, 13 Dec 2005,

27 Feb 2007 <[http://www.apprising.org/archives/2005/12/emerging\\_with\\_t.html](http://www.apprising.org/archives/2005/12/emerging_with_t.html)>. \*\*“modernism,” Christian Cyclopedia, Erwin L. Leuker, et. al., eds, Concordia Publishing House, 2000, 27 Feb 2007 <<http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=m&word=MODERNISM>>.

24. Andy Crouch, Brian D. McLaren, Erwin Raphael McManus, Michael Horton, Frederica Matthewes-Green, The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives, Leonard Sweet, gen. ed. (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS Books, 2003) 213. Quoting Brian McLaren.
25. Gibbs and Bolger, 55; quoting Dieter Zander of Quest in Novato, CA.
26. Bell, 150.
27. McLaren, Last Word, xii.
28. Ken Silva, “Brian McLaren and Hell,” Apprising Ministries, 28 Dec 2005, quoting from an interview of Brian McLaren with Sherry Huang of *Beliefnet*, 27 Feb 2007 <[http://www.apprising.org/archives/2005/12/brian\\_mclaren\\_a.html](http://www.apprising.org/archives/2005/12/brian_mclaren_a.html)>.
29. McLaren, Last Word, xvii.
30. Bell, 148.
31. Gibbs and Bolger, 48.
32. Gibbs and Bolger, 48.
33. Gibbs and Bolger, 56.
34. Quoted from the Lutheran Service Book (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2006) 555. You can listen to the melody here: <<http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lbw/lbw07.htm>>.

***Sola Scriptura* • *Sola Gratia* • *Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 7: Sheep Without a Shepherd***

by *Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

- “I no longer consider myself a tour guide, but a fellow traveler.”

-Emerging Church leader Spencer Burke

In Part 6 of our discussion, we explored the Gospel message of the Emerging Church, which for some Emergents has become a Social Gospel. In this part, we will look at the role of the “pastor” in Emerging Churches.

The Emerging Church, in its reaction to modernism, generally avoids propositional “truth claims.” An example of this can be seen in the words of Scot McKnight, “...it [the Emerging Movement] sees *cock-sure certainty as a cancer*,”<sup>1</sup> and the words of Frank Viola: “*The emerging church phenomenon has dumped the modern penchant to always be certain in answering every spiritual question under the sun. Instead, it has rested content to embrace mystery and paradox in our God.*”<sup>2</sup>

In one sense, the above two viewpoints are correct, to the extent that they critique a modernistic theological worldview. There are many mysteries in the Bible that we can not and should not attempt to answer, that have nevertheless been explained via rationalism. There are, however, two problems with these quotes. First, those in the Emerging conversation often fail to distinguish between modernism and the mainline church, unfairly lumping both into the same category and heaping invectives on the latter.<sup>3</sup> Second, while there *are* mysteries in Scripture that should remain unplumbed, there are also many things of which we can be certain. It is at this juncture that a decision has to be made. In order to be certain of *anything*, you must accept Scripture as the source and norm of all theology. It is here that many people in the Emerging conversation depart the realm of orthodoxy (they’re not alone - so do many in mainline churches). By abandoning Holy Scripture as their sole source, they usher in a man-made theology in which everything becomes relative. Experience, mysticism, and imagination are all thrown into the pot, creating an unsavory stew that doesn’t follow the

recipe. This admixture makes certainty *impossible*, which is just fine with postmodernists, but is not “just fine” with God. Jesus says in John 8:31-32 that **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** It is by continuing in Jesus word, and only *His* word, that liberating truth is found - the path of experience and uncertainty leads to enslavement. But uncertainty, rather than being eschewed by the Emerging Church, is being embraced.

One area of Scripture in which there is certainty is the “job description” of a pastor. There are many verses in the Bible that delineate the qualifications and expectations placed by God on the pastor. Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus are examples. One skill that pastors *must* possess, as mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:2, is the ability to teach. Not only must they have the ability to teach, they must use that ability to teach those in their flock. The role of the pastor as a teacher is disdained in many corners of the Emerging Church, at least in a didactic sense.

We shouldn’t take ourselves too seriously. After all, if our perspectives are biased by the groups we belong to, if our understanding is limited by our contexts, if our view is valid only from our subjective standpoint, then each of us is untrustworthy and subjective in knowledge and judgment and none of us can presume to very much authority.<sup>4</sup>

The perspective in the above quote of Brian McLaren, in which he presents a nice mix of circular reasoning and false propositions, is indicative of the postmodern Emerging view. Contrary to that lack of certainty is the witness of Scripture. Paul advised his young pastoral friend Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

2 Timothy 4:1-5

Paul and Timothy lived in a time very similar to our own. People of many different cultural and religious backgrounds were thrust together in the Roman world. Many religious myths were “for sale” in the world marketplace, and no one idea appeared to have validity over another. Much like the postmodern times of today, people lived with ambiguity and paradox. While Paul tailored his message to his audience, speaking in ways each of their unique cultures would understand, he never changed or compromised his message. When Paul stood up to speak to Jew and Gentile alike, he didn’t say “we are always aware that we could be wrong,” as does Emerging Church leader Brad Cecil.<sup>5</sup> He didn’t say “We are also genuinely open to being wrong about

parts and perhaps all our beliefs—while at the same time being fully committed to them,” as does Emerging Church leader Pete Rollins.<sup>6</sup> When Paul spoke, he wasn’t afraid to present propositional truth or “proof texts” (the bane of many postmodern Emergents):

for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Acts 18:28

Paul didn’t sit down with each group and swap stories so that truth could be culturally incarnated, or keep quiet and hope that people would come to “live in the way of Jesus” after observing the Godly life he led. He *preached* to them the Gospel. After his miraculous conversion, he immediately began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, which was blasphemy to the Jews and nearly got him killed (Acts 9). He wasn’t afraid to speak of the bodily resurrection of Christ, which would have been offensive to the Sadducees and the gnostically-inclined Greeks . He didn’t shrink from proclaiming “Jesus is Lord,” which could have incurred the wrath of Caesar. Instead, he “spoke out boldly” (Acts 13:46).

Where Scriptural authority is rejected, conviction of belief wanes. This lack of conviction is the ground the Emerging Church holds:

...a teacher of great worth in postmodern society isn’t the one with the right answers, but the one who can ask the right questions, and then walk the road of discovery with others.<sup>7</sup>

We are comfortable with having a lot of unanswered questions. We think maybe that’s what it’s like being in relationship with a living Being. We think it’s more honest than providing a lot a answers, abstract notions of truth.<sup>8</sup>

Standing up for the truth or fighting the culture wars has no appeal to emerging church leaders.<sup>9</sup>

The further you walk away from Scripture, the less certain your faith becomes, because faith rests not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God through the Gospel (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Paul and the other first century pastors had no such lack of conviction:

because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel,

so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.  
1 Thessalonians 2:4

The conviction of Paul's teaching, and that of the other Apostles and pastors of the first century was firmly rooted in the Word of Jesus. Matthew 7:28 reads:

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,

The Greek word for "teaching" used in this verse is *didache*, which means "teaching" or "doctrine." It is the same Greek word used in Acts 2:42:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

In both Matthew 7:28 and Acts 2:42, the *King James* translation of the Bible translates *didache* as "doctrine."

Paul tells Timothy:

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.<sup>10</sup>

1 Timothy 6:3-5

Thus, the New Testament Church devoted itself to Jesus' *didache*. That *didache* is the same that is to be taught to pastors to this day. Paul instructs Timothy:

and 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 Timothy 2:2

What is this *didache* that all pastors are to preach? Paul answers:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you

received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:1-3

This *didache* is the Law and the Gospel, preached in all its wondrous salvific detail! It is to be taught, preached, demonstrated, and defended with steadfast certainty.<sup>11</sup> As Paul declares in Ephesians 6:19-20:

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (NIV)

### **Let's Be Irenic**

In an article co-authored by Emerging Church leaders Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay, they mention what I, and likely they, would consider to be a creed for the Emerging Church:

...cultivating a wholehearted devotion to Christ and his gospel, by seeking to join in the mission of God in our time, by calling people to follow God in the way of Jesus, and by doing so in an irenic spirit of love for all our brothers and sisters.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar spirit is this quote from Emergent Village:

We understand the gospel to be centered in Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God, a message offering reconciliation with God, humanity, creation, and self. We are committed to a “generous orthodoxy” in faith and practice - affirming the historic Christian faith and the biblical injunction to love one another even when we disagree.<sup>13</sup>

Both of the above quotes offer a reprise of the Social Gospel that we considered in Part 6. That being said, we should indeed operate in an irenic spirit of love, and we should love one another even when we disagree. Both statements however, stop short. The definition of “irenics,” according to the Christian Encyclopedia, is this:

Theology which tries to arrive at Christian peace. Irenics presupposes polemics, which in its true character should have no other aim than irenics. The “bond of peace,” Eph 4:3, embraces all Christians, and “speaking the truth in love,” Eph 4:15, deserves to be emphasized at all times. But he who

truly seeks ecclesiastical peace well-pleasing to God will find himself compelled to engage in controversy. True irenics does not exclude polemics, but is another way of gaining the same end. The danger of polemics lies in the direction of separatism and magnification of unessential differences; irenic efforts are prone to degenerate into syncretism and unionism; love of revealed truth guards against both dangers.<sup>14</sup>

The Emerging Church has erred on the side of syncretism and unionism, and mostly *ignored* polemics of any kind. Emerging Church leader John O’Keefe states: “We desire growth and learning, not dogma and doctrine.”<sup>15</sup> Spencer Burke comments: “Rather than force people to fall into line, an ooze-y community tolerates differences and treats people with opposing views with great dignity.”<sup>16</sup>

Not only is there a biblical injunction to love our brothers and sisters in Christ even when we disagree, there is also a biblical injunction to point out doctrinal error that our brothers and sisters might hold:

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Titus 1:9

preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,

2 Timothy 4:2-3

Fellow Christians who continue in doctrinal error are to be avoided:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Romans 16:17

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

2 Thessalonians 3:6

It may seem ironic, but it is biblical, that an irenic spirit of love includes pointing out doctrinal error to a fellow Christian. You ultimately may have to avoid that brother or sister, even to the point of excommunicating them from the Church, both in love for them and in love for the Church. This is never an easy thing to do. No one *likes* to discipline, but just as parents discipline their children out of love, so it is with Christians. To allow and offer succor to false doctrine, while it may on the surface seem loving,

actually harms and pollutes the body of Christ.

In their pastoral efforts to be irenic, the Emerging Church has created an awfully big tent. By stretching the boundaries of Christian doctrine, and in some cases abandoning Scriptural authority and the doctrine of justification by faith, the tent stakes are spread so far as to include just about anybody under the Christian big-top. Atonement is sometimes optional. Belief in Jesus as your Savior is occasionally optional. Not only are those who don't believe Jesus is their Savior welcomed into the tent, they're offered seats on the board of directors:

“Evangelism or mission for me is no longer about persuading people to believe what I believe, no matter how edgy or creative I get. It is more about shared experiences and encounters. It is about walking the journey of life and faith together, each distinct to his or her own tradition [religion] and culture but with the possibility of encountering God and truth from one another.”<sup>17</sup>

Much of what exists in other faiths may not necessarily be hostile to the kingdom. Christians can learn much from other walks of life.<sup>18</sup>

“It is possible for someone who does not know Jesus to be saved.”<sup>19</sup>

It will take a decolonized theology for Christians to appreciate the genuineness of others' faiths, and to see and celebrate what is good, beautiful, and true in their beliefs without any illusions that down deep we all are believers in the same thing.<sup>20</sup>

### **Let the Sheep Beware**

In the article co-authored by Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay mentioned above, they state that they “...affirm the historic Trinitarian Christian faith and the ancient creeds....”<sup>21</sup> Their statement sounds like a good start, but in the following paragraph they say this:

But we also acknowledge that we each find great joy and promise in dialogue and conversation, even about the items noted in the previous paragraph. Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have come to know what they believe and how they believe it by being open to the honest critique and varied perspectives of others. We are radically open to the possibility that our hermeneutic stance will be greatly enriched in conversation with others.

In other words, they affirm nothing, even when it comes to the bare bones minimums of Christianity that many Christians assume as a “given.” For them, *everything* is fair game, including the basics. If you elevate yourself above Scripture, so that you decide

what is and isn't God's Word, everything falls apart, including your confession. This position isn't particularly surprising – plenty of people outside of the Emerging Church hold the same sort of subscription. What is surprising, is that they are bold enough to pose their affirmation of orthodoxy in the first place. At least some of them are highly inaccurate historians, because their definition of the “historic Trinitarian Christian faith” doesn't match that of the protestant historic Trinitarian Christian faith doctrine. Of those whose work I've studied, which would include Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, and Brian McLaren, none of them proclaim the Gospel as presented in Part 5. All of them are also involved in mysticism (see Part 4) and have been *heavily* influenced by postmodern thought. You won't be hearing any sermons or reading any blogs about justification by faith from them. In the ultimate irony, Brian McLaren, who endorses the “historic Trinitarian Christian faith,” also says just the opposite: “We must continually be aware that the ‘old, old story’ may not be the ‘true, true story.’”<sup>22</sup> There is a mountain of criticism that could be cast here, but that is certainly not my desire. My point is that they aren't who they say they are. They misrepresent themselves and are leading their flocks astray. Let the sheep beware.

The postmodern influence has drastically reshaped the pastoral office in the Emerging Church. While it was once assumed that the teacher knew more than the student, that is no longer the case. Spencer Burke proudly asserts “I no longer consider myself a tour guide, but a fellow traveler.”<sup>23</sup> Emerging Church leader Rob Bell says “I have as many questions as answers...”<sup>24</sup>

Pastors are “entrusted with the task of preaching the Gospel” (Galatians 2:7, NIV), but the Emerging Church is forsaking the *didache* of Christ. While Paul stated that he “did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), the Emerging Church fails to do so. They fail to preach an orthodox Gospel, they embrace uncertainty, and they espouse false doctrine rather than “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). For a church that claims to be seeking a first century way of living the Gospel, these men and women have failed in their witness, largely forsaking their pastoral duty. While they claim to uphold the historic orthodox teachings of the church, what they've written often reveals other beliefs.

Coming up, *The Emerging Church, Part 8: Final Thoughts*.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at:

<http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. Scot McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Protest,” *Jesus Creed*, 27 Feb 2007 <<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=512>>.
2. Frank Viola, “Will the Emerging Church Fully Emerge?,” *EmergingChurch.info*, 27

Feb 2007 <<http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/frankviola/index.htm>>.

3. Here are two examples in which the mainline church is unfairly linked to modernism. The first is from Gibbs and Bolger's book Emerging Churches, and the second is from Brian McLaren's book A Generous Orthodoxy:  
"During modernity, the idea that Christians 'participate with God' was lost. Participation was replaced by a willful God who commands all reality through his awesome power. The modern God no longer had humans' ultimate good in mind. Rather, this God simply wanted complete obedience. By reducing God to power, modernity removed the sense that a good and beautiful God participates with humans. Modern people fled from this God of unbridled power. They sought to create 'safe zones' (the secular realm) so that God would not interfere with them. Modern churches [here being defined as any church that doesn't fit the Emergent Church ideal] resemble this modern God. Their leadership is based on power, control, and submission to authority."\*  
"This rebuke to arrogant intellectualizing is especially apt for modern Christians, who do not build cathedrals of stone and glass as in the Middle Ages, but rather conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument. These conceptual cathedrals—known popularly as systematic theologies—were cherished by modern minds, liberal and conservative...."\*\*\*  
\*Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 192.  
\*\*Brian D. McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am 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 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 168.
4. Brian D. McLaren, The Church on the Other Side (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, 2000) 163.
5. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 123.
6. Gibbs and Bolger, 132.
7. Leonard Hjalmarson, "Kingdom Leadership in the Postmodern Era," NextReformation.com, Winter 2003, 27 Feb 2007  
<<http://nextreformation.com/wp-admin/resources/Leadership.pdf>>.
8. Gibbs and Bolger, 124; quoting Debbie Blue of House of Mercy in St. Paul.
9. Gibbs and Bolger, 124.
10. 1 Timothy 6:4 is misquoted in "A Response to Recent Criticism," the article I reference below in the beginning of my discussion on irenics (see endnote 12). In an effort to eliminate the biblical commands to point out doctrinal error, these Emerging Church leaders do a little "Scripture twisting" with this verse. They replace the front of the verse with their own words, and then quote only the last part of the verse, dropping the context of the front part of the verse and ignoring the surrounding context of verses 1, 2, 3, and 5, thereby changing the meaning. They state: "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, patient when wronged.' In addition he warned Timothy not to develop 'an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction.'" They put a "spin" on this

section, as you can see by comparing my correct quotation of it. These verses do not warn Timothy “not to develop and unhealthy interest...” Placed in the proper context of verses 1 and 2, Paul is contrasting the proper doctrine of verses 1 and 2 which Timothy is to “teach and urge,” with the teaching of false doctrine in verses 3-5.

Brian McLaren, one of the authors of this quote, is being a hypocrite here twice over by using a twisted proof text. He doesn't heed his own *bad* advice: “I intentionally avoid including a lot of Biblical references in my writing because the method of ‘proof-texting’ is terribly problematic. Yes – it can show the Biblical roots beneath a statement, but it also can be used to give the appearance that a statement is supported by Biblical authority when it isn't.”

Brian McLaren, “Do You Believe the Bible is the Inerrant Word of God?,” online question, [brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net), 27 Mar 2007

<<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000406.html>>.

11. Martin Luther spoke of Christian certainty in Bondage of the Will:

“For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion – in order that we may not be misled by words – I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and invincible persevering . . .

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings. Elsewhere we have no need either of Erasmus [*sic*] or any other instructor to teach us that in matters which are doubtful or useless and unnecessary, assertions, disputing, and wrangling, are not only foolish but impious, and Paul condemns them in more than one place...

Let Skeptics and Academics, keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us ‘assertors’ twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves. How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand . . . that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? In Rom. 10 he calls it ‘confession,’ saying, ‘with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.’ And Christ says: ‘Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before My Father’. Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is in us. What need is there to dwell on this?

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity.

(Martin Luther, Bondage of the Will, Library of Christian Classics, Vol XVII, Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 105-106).”

Quoted from: Rolf Preus, “Luther Revisited: The Doctrine of Justification Is Still the Issue,” Minnesota Lutheran Free Conference, St. Cloud, 31 Oct 1998, at [ChristForUs.org](http://www.christforus.org), 27 Mar 2007

<<http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/rolf.html>>.

12. Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay, “A Response to Recent Criticism,” [brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net), 27 Feb 2007 <<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000429.html>>.

13. Values & Practices page, Emergent Village, 27 Feb 2007

<<http://www.emergentvillage.org/about-information/values-and-practices>>.

14. “irenic,” Christian Cyclopedia, Erwin L. Leuker, et. al., eds, Concordia Publishing House, 2000, 27 Feb 2007

<<http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=I&word=IRENICS>>.

15. John O'Keefe, "QUANTUM SERVANTHOOD: knowing how to lead in chaos - Visual," formerly available at ginkworld.net.
16. Spencer Burke, "FROM THE THIRD FLOOR OF THE GARAGE: The Story of TheOOZE," [theOOZE.com](http://theooze.com), 3, 27 Feb 2007  
<<http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=827&page=3>>.
17. Gibbs and Bolger, 131, Quoting Pip Piper of maji, Birmingham, U.K.
18. Gibbs and Bolger, 131.
19. Dallas Willard, "Apologetics in Action," interview with *Cutting Edge Magazine*, 5.1, Winter 2001, 28 Feb 2007  
<<http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=14>>.
20. Leonard Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic* (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 1991) 131.  
Available for free download at: <http://www.leonardsweet.com/Quantum/>.
21. Jones, et. al., "A Response to Recent Criticism."
22. McLaren, *Generous*, 294. Thanks to [Apologetics Index](http://www.apologeticsindex.org/) for originally pointing out this quote: <<http://www.apologeticsindex.org/>>.
23. Burke, 3.
24. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 14.

***Sola Scriptura* • *Sola Gratia* • *Sola Fide***

## ***The Emerging Church, Part 8: Final Thoughts***

by *Scott Diekmann*  
*SoundWitness.org*

To jump from the endnote number in the text to the actual endnote and vice versa, click on the respective endnote number.

All quotes containing italics are those of the quoted author unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

We've covered a lot of ground in the last seven parts of our discussion. We explored the attitude of the Emerging Church toward Scripture, finding that some have substituted the doctrines derived from the inerrant and inspired Word of God with a doctrine based on an uninspired melding of Scripture, experience, mysticism, and imagination. That lack of Scriptural fidelity has at times led to a redefined Gospel, a message that is predominantly Law rather than Gospel, and pastors who have failed to present the whole counsel of God.

The Church cannot surrender to postmodernism the God-ordained fact that *truth is knowable*. While we as Christians, this side of heaven, will never know *all* truth, we can know all truth that God has revealed in Scripture. Jesus said "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). Truth is knowable. It is known by abiding in the Word of God. *This* truth is not open to interpretation or derivation by cultural means, because it is not derived from the world. *This* truth is revealed by the Holy Spirit: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). *This* truth does not change. It was *once* delivered for *all* the saints (Jude 1:3). The Emerging Church claims that Christianity needs to be reimagined or reinvented. The Gospel was not invented, it was given to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is not ours to "reinvent."

For those in the Emerging Church who have come to a different Gospel, the root cause of their divergence is an ignorance of, or diminution or abandonment of the single most important Christian doctrine - justification by grace through faith. It was so important to St. Paul that he proclaimed "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). If justification by faith is not the doctrine from which all others are derived, both Law and Gospel become unimportant and fade away, which is exactly what is happening in the Emerging Church. There is no focus on sinners in need of a Savior. Original sin and hell are rarely mentioned. Where there is no recognized sin, there is no need for a Savior. The means of grace, Word and Sacrament, in which God comes to us, have been abandoned in favor of a mystical experience in which man vainly searches for God.

The Gospel has been turned into Law - "living in the way of Jesus." Once the Gospel becomes Law, there is no real difference between Christianity and other religions. Other religions now have "much to offer."

Many in the Emerging Church, in their zeal to care for the poor and the oppressed miss the forest for the trees. They don't seem to realize that when Jesus said in Luke 4:18:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

He wasn't just talking about beggars and prisoners. Jesus came to proclaim the Gospel to those who were poor in spirit, to those who were in bondage to sin, to those who were spiritually blind. Jesus' message was one of Law and Gospel: "...repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15), "...repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations..." (Luke 24:47).

It's never pleasant to point out the doctrinal error of a fellow sister or brother in Christ, but at times it is necessary in the spirit of true irenics, as discussed in Part 7. It's unlikely that the more heterodox leaders in the Emerging church are purposely trying to mislead people, but they are deviating from the *didache* of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Any doctrine that is not based *solely* on the plain Word of Scripture, and is not based on justification by grace through faith, is destined to become a "different Gospel" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-12). As we've seen over and over again throughout the different parts of this article, the Emerging Church's overall position is often not *Sola Scriptura* or *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide*, in spite of what they claim.

Let me state again that there *is* an orthodox side to the Emerging conversation which I don't want to misrepresent and to which this article isn't particularly addressed, other than as a warning flag. This discussion is not in any way an attack on particular individuals:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

While it hasn't been discussed in detail, there are good things that the Emerging Church emphasizes, such as the revival of the liturgy, and a more thoughtful approach to song lyrics that is less anthropocentric compared with other contemporary lyrics. However, the impression I'm left with after reading a lot of Emerging Church material is that heterodox doctrine is the face of the Emerging Church. Head on down to your local bookstore and check out the selection of Emerging Church books - they're mostly heterodox. It's not that there aren't more moderate voices in the conversation, it's just

that they aren't on center stage. In order for that face to change, it will be necessary for orthodox Christians to step up and speak out against the false doctrine that is caked on like bad mascara, or the face of the Emerging Church will forever have a "black eye." Several Emerging Church leaders have complained that the Emerging Church has been misrepresented by characterizing the whole movement based on the writings of a few members, but those same leaders haven't spoken up and pointed out the error of their peers. That tactic is the theological equivalent of spitting into the wind.

I am not alone in my assessment. Emerging Church leader Mark Driscoll, the pastor at Mars Hill in Ballard, Washington, has a similar view:

If both doctrine and practice are constantly changing, the result is living heresy, which is where I fear the Revisionist Emergent tribe [his equivalent of my "squeaking wheel"] of the Emerging church is heading.<sup>2</sup>

But, what I find frightening is the trend among some to drift from what I consider to be faithful conservative evangelical theological convictions in favor of a less distinctively Christian spirituality. The result is a trip around the same cul-de-sac of false doctrine that a previous generation spent their life driving around while touting their progress.<sup>3</sup>

If the gospel is lost, as I fear it already has been among some Revisionists, then tomorrow will be a dark day for the truth about Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

While I share Pastor Driscoll's concern for "the truth about Jesus," tomorrow will not be a dark day for the truth of the Gospel.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

2 Corinthians 4:8-12

The truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will always remain - the gates of hell and Satan's wiles *cannot* prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

The Emerging Church embraces experience and mystery as means to find God. God *is* mysterious, but He cannot be found in ways that the human imagination might invoke. He cannot be found through mysticism. He cannot be found in labyrinths or incense. He cannot be found in icons or breath prayers. He cannot be found through self-discovery or imagination. He is hidden in places most people fail to look, because those places are too obvious and ordinary. He is hidden in unremarkable bread and wine, and water, along with the spoken or printed Word. But ordinary speech, which we

constantly hear and sometimes ignore, when it speaks the Gospel, is *the power of God*.

The same Word through whom the heavens were made and all their host, was incarnated in Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the *Word* made flesh.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Jesus came to do what we could not - live a sinless life. He fulfilled the requirements of the Law perfectly. Yet he was unjustly crucified in spite of His innocence. Why? Because He carried your sin and my sin in His body to the cross on that dreadful afternoon. He bore the full wrath and fury of a righteous God for the sins of all people for all time.

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, he conquered sin and death for us. By believing the promises of the Gospel, Christians receive forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Jesus sent us His Holy Spirit, who lives in us and daily creates new life in us. But God doesn't stop there. Not only does God give His promise of forgiveness of sins to us in the Scriptures, that promise of forgiveness also comes to us *physically*, hidden in earthly elements.

If you want mystery, we've got it!<sup>5</sup> God became man. He died on a cross and shed his blood that we might live sin-free. *That very same body and blood* comes to us to offer us forgiveness in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. "Take, eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26). "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27b-28). Through the Lord's Supper we have the same opportunity as did doubting Thomas:

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

John 20:27

Jesus Christ comes to us *bodily* and offers us forgiveness of sins. We are here offered a *full* sensory experience in the divine. This is no work that we perform, climbing a ladder to heaven where we by faith receive Christ's body and blood. The work that needs to be done was done *for us* by Jesus on the cross. This is Christ, coming to us! His body, in, with, and under ordinary bread. His blood, in, with, and under ordinary wine. We can touch it, smell it, taste it. Through the mysterious operation of the

Sacrament of Baptism, our sins are washed away (Acts 22:16). Through ordinary water and the power of the Word, as we daily remember our Baptism we recognize that

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:4

We can rejoice in this forgiveness that comes to us tangibly through such ordinary means. God, who is Spirit, coming to us in a way that we can fully experience, through the power of the Word. And yet who can explain it? Even the word is mysterious – the Latin word for sacrament, *sacramentum*, means “*mystery*.”

Through Word and Sacrament, we are brought to faith and renewed in faith. These means are external to us. When I look inward to experience God, I discover a Christian at war with his sinful nature. Often though, it seems as if a truce has been declared. I don't do the things I *know* I should be doing. And when the truce is broken, I *still* can't meet the demands of the Law. That's not much of an assurance. When I look outward to experience God, what I see is a Savior offering me His body and blood, shed for me and for all people, for the forgiveness of sins. Even when my faith is weak, the Lord is strong. I can look to my Baptism and know that I am a saved child of God. The promises of God are always there, waiting to be grasped in faith.

The goal of the Emerging Church, to “*live in the way of Jesus*,” a *demand* of the Law, cannot be met until one is first *forgiven through the blood of Jesus*, a *gift* of the Gospel. As the Emerging Church reaches out to a postmodern world, it is *that* Gospel, a Gospel of forgiveness through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ that it must preach and teach if it is to be a faithful member of the body of Christ.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

All parts of this article may be referenced or downloaded separately or all together at:

<http://www.soundwitness.org/evangel/index.html>.

The author may be contacted at [zanson@msn.com](mailto:zanson@msn.com).

## **Endnotes**

1. If you're not familiar with *didache*, see Part 6.
2. Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church," Criswell Theological Review, 3.2, Spring 2006, 90-91, 10 March 2007 <<http://criswell.wordpress.com/files/2006/03/3.2%20APastoralPerspectiveontheEmergentChurch%5BDriscoll%5D.PDF>>.

- [3.](#) Driscoll, 92.
- [4.](#) Driscoll, 93.
- [5.](#) I say “we” because I am presenting Lutheran theology. *Welcome!*

***Sola Scriptura • Sola Gratia • Sola Fide***