

## **Emergent Church Movement**

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### **What does the Emergent Church movement believe about Sola Scriptura?**

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Emergent Church leaders will tell you they are uncertain of most things. In fact, they wear ambiguity like a badge of honor. But of one thing they are certain: The Bible is not the inspired, infallible, inerrant, uniquely authoritative Word of God.

This is part two of a series. Read [part one](#).

As we continue our series, "Was the Reformation a Mistake?" we take up this question: How does the Emergent Church movement's so-called "new Reformation" compare to the one that freed Biblical Christianity from the shroud of Romanism in the 16th century? What of the five solas that were rallying cries of that Reformation? –

- Sola Scriptura: Our Authority is Scripture Alone
- Sola Gratia: Salvation is by Grace Alone
- Solus Christus: Salvation is Through Christ Alone
- Sola Fide: Justification is By Faith Alone
- Soli Deo Gloria: The Glory Belongs to God Alone

We shall let Emergent spokesmen answer for themselves.

#### **Inerrancy is "Foreign to the Bible's Vocabulary"**

What do Emergent Church leaders say is the nature of the Bible? Emergent guru Brian McLaren says that "the Bible is "an inspired gift from God – a unique collection of literary artifacts".<sup>1</sup> Emergent leader Doug Pagitt agrees with McLaren, hinting at what they mean by "inspired". The "history of the Christian faith," Pagitt says, is that "the Scriptures come from and inform the church."<sup>2</sup> In other words, they do not come from

God in the sense of verbal, plenary, authoritative inspiration spoken of in passages such as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21.

McLaren is even more explicit. He says that "*the purpose of Scripture is to equip God's people for good works.*"<sup>3</sup> The italics are his. McLaren and other Emergents repeat this statement often in their writings, almost as a mantra. But there is never a word about Scripture's telling mankind *how to become* one of God's people, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Throughout their writings, Emergents' assumption seems to be that everybody is already one of "God's people." You just have to get busy doing "good works."

But then, after stating that "the purpose of Scripture is to equip God's people for good works" McLaren follows immediately with this:

Shouldn't a simple statement like this be far more important than statements with words foreign to the Bible's vocabulary about itself (inerrant, authoritative, literal, revelatory, objective, absolute, propositional, etc.)?<sup>4</sup>

Just how "foreign" does McLaren think these words are to Scripture? He does not hesitate to tell us, in a book with one of the most ironic titles ever: *Adventures in Missing the Point*, co-authored by McLaren and so-called "evangelical left" spokesman Tony Campolo. McLaren and Campolo's title reflects their fatuous belief that the Bible-believing Christian church has "missed the point" on just about everything (and, of course, Emergents have "gotten the point"). "The Bible is an inspired gift from God – a unique collection of literary artifacts,"<sup>5</sup> McLaren says. But it is not the inspired, infallible, inerrant, propositional, revelatory, absolute, objective, Word of God. What's more, McLaren asserts, "not even one-hundredth of one percent of the Bible" presents "objective information about God."<sup>6</sup>

Those are some pretty absolute statements from a man who claims that little, if anything, is certain. But McLaren is just getting warmed up. The Christian Church, says McLaren, has misrepresented the Bible as something containing "universal laws" — "We claimed that the Bible was easy to understand" — "We presented the Bible as a repository of sacred propositions." All of that was wrong, he says. And, echoing the true position of the Roman Catholic church, McLaren laments that "we mass produced the Bible" and gave Christians the impression that they could interpret it for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

### **Not Orthodoxy, But Orthoparadoxy**

According to Emergents, how are we to approach this "inspired" but humanly-originated, non-inerrant, non-infallible, non-authoritative Bible? Emergent spokesman Dwight J. Friesen, a professor of practical theology at Mars Hill Graduate School (Seattle) and a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, says that Christ was not interested in orthodoxy but in "a full and flourishing human life."<sup>8</sup> What must develop, says Friesen, is not orthodoxy – correct teaching – but a piece of Emergent doubletalk called orthoparadoxy, "correct paradox." Friesen writes:

Orthoparadoxody represents a conversational theological method that seeks to graciously embrace difference while bringing the fullness of a differentiated social-self to the other. Through the methodology of orthoparadoxy, competing ideas, practices, and hermeneutics are seen as an invitation to conversational engagement rather than as something to refute, reform, or revise."<sup>9</sup>

"Current theological methods that often stress agreement/disagreement, win/loss, good/bad, orthodox/heresy, and the like set people up for constant battles to convince and convert the other to their way of believing..."<sup>10</sup>

"Orthoparadox theology is less concerned with creating "once for all" doctrinal statements or dogmatic claims and is more interested in holding competing truth claims in right tension....Orthoparadox theology requires a dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

"[S]ee conversation starters where you once saw theological disagreement."<sup>12</sup>

This is how we must approach the Bible, according to Brian McLaren:

"Drop any affair you may have with Certainty, Proof, Argument...The ultimate Bible study or sermon in recent decades yielded clarity. That clarity, unfortunately, was often boring – and probably not that accurate, either, since reality is seldom clear, but usually fizzy and mysterious..."<sup>13</sup>

"Find things to do with the Bible other than read and study it" [and McLaren suggests several that are forms of medieval, mystical meditation commended by the Roman Catholic church].<sup>14</sup>

"In the recent past we generally began our apologetic by arguing for the Bible's authority, then used the Bible to prove our other points. In the future we'll present the Bible less like evidence in a court case and more like works of art in an art gallery."<sup>15</sup>

"In the recent past we talked a lot about absolute truth, attempting to prove abstract propositions about God (for instance, proving the sovereignty of God)." [That, McLaren asserts, is passé in the postmodern world.]<sup>16</sup>

### **Protestants Have the Bible All Wrong**

According to McLaren, Protestants have gotten it all wrong about the Bible, using propositional truth, right and wrong, to "lay low" their Catholic "brethren" —

"Protestants have paid more attention to the Bible than any other group, but sadly, much of their Bible study has been undertaken to fuel their efforts to prove themselves right and others wrong (and therefore worthy of protest)... the Bible does not yield its best resources to people who approach it seeking ammunition with which to lay their [Catholic] brethren low... How many Protestants can't pick up their Bibles without hearing arguments play in their heads on every page, echoes of the polemical preachers they have heard since childhood? How much Bible study is, therefore, an adventure in missing the point?"<sup>17</sup>

### **Warmed-Over Neo-Orthodoxy**

Students of church history will recognize much of Emergent Church thinking on the Bible as the warmed-over 20th-century neo-orthodoxy that destroyed most mainline Protestant churches as well as many conservative ones. Emergents are following in the insolent footsteps of Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and others, who in turn were influenced by early 19th-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose great gift to theology was to assert that there is no such thing as objective truth.

One of the main reasons the Emergent Church movement is finding acceptance among Evangelicals is that few Evangelicals are students of church history. As such, they are condemned to repeat the deadly mistakes of the past by embracing a theology of nonsense that leads souls to Hell.

### **Acceptance in Reputedly Conservative Seminaries**

The Emergent Church movement is spreading a new wave of spiritual poison through Christian academia. The fact that Emergents are welcomed on the faculties and in the classrooms of openly liberal seminaries is no surprise. But the response to the

Emergent movement in the majority of reputedly more conservative Evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries is also friendly. It ranges from favorable classroom exposure to outright advocacy. Seminaries that are falling into the Emergent web include Dallas Theological Seminary, Houghton College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Biblical Theological Seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, Erskine College and Seminary, Biola University, Taylor Seminary, and most Southern Baptist schools.

It only takes a few years of exposure to false teaching for young minds to become the generation that will carry the poison out of the seminaries and colleges, into the pulpits, and into the pews.

**Next: [Emergents on Salvation](#)**

#### **References:**

1. Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), page 75.
2. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, editors, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope: Key Leaders Offer an Inside Look* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), page 171.
3. 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, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), page 183.
4. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, page 183.
5. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 75.
6. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 262.
7. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, pages 76-77.

8. Dwight J. Friesen, "Orthoparadoxy: Emerging Hope for Embracing Difference" in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, page 204.
9. Friesen, page 207.
10. Friesen, page 208.
11. Friesen, page 209.
12. Friesen, page 212.
13. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 84.
14. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 85.
15. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 101.
16. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, page 102.
17. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, page 138

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