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Contemporary Spirituality and the Emerging Church¹

John T. Pless

A particular example of contemporary spirituality is the Emerging Church Movement. The Emerging Church Conversation, as some of its advocates prefer to call it, is a loosely connected network of pastors, mission leaders, and theologians looking for a new way of defining Christian identity and mission in a postmodern setting. It is most often associated with Brian McLaren, who was the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church—a non-denominational church in Burtonville, Maryland—from 1982 to 2006.² Although, as McLaren puts it, he slipped into the ministry through the back door having no seminary education, he has become a prolific author and conference speaker. Among his many books and articles, *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* was published by Zondervan in 2004 and has quickly become something of a defining text for the movement.³

As the title of McLaren's book amply indicates, the movement is eclectic but it is not rootless. McLaren, like many of the significant figures associated with the Emerging Church, grew up in a fundamentalist church (Plymouth Brethren). His own pilgrimage included involvement with the

¹ An early version of this paper appeared as "Emergent Church Ecclesiology" in *Theologia et Apologia: Essays in Reformation Theology and Its Defense Presented to Rod Rosenblatt*, ed. Adam S. Francisco, Corey D. Maas, and Steven P. Mueller (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 297–315.

² For a history of Brian McLaren's involvement in the birth and transformation of Cedar Ridge Community Church see "Cedar Ridge Community Church: Our History," *The Cedar Ridge Community Church Web site* (Spencerville, MD: Cedar Ridge Community Church, 2007), <http://www.crcc.org/section.php?SectionID=29>.

³ The first part of the title of McLaren's book, "a generous orthodoxy" comes from a phrase coined by the late Yale theologian Hans Frei (1922–1988) who is often described as the father of "post-critical" narrative theology. For an analysis of the roots of the Emerging Church, see the three part article of Robert Klenck, "What's Wrong with the 21st Century Church?" *Crossroad Web site* (Kjos Ministries), <http://www.crossroad.to/News/Church/Klenck1.html>.

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Jesus People and time in a charismatic Episcopal church and various evangelical communions before becoming pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church. In various ways, the Emerging Church Movement may be seen as both a product of, and a reaction against, American Evangelicalism. The term “emergent” was gleaned from forestry where it refers to small saplings that spring up in the shadow of trees; while at first these young plants appear to be insignificant, dwarfed in the shade of older, full grown trees, they eventually thrive and take the place of the older trees as they die off.⁴ In the late 1990s, this term was taken by those associated with the Young Leader Network—a group created by the Leadership Network—to identify a new approach to youth ministry and ultimately to the understanding of the church itself. In addition to McLaren, Leonard Sweet has become a prominent voice in the movement arguing that in contrast to both traditional evangelicals and seeker-sensitive evangelicals, ministry in the twenty-first century should be experiential, participatory, image-driven, and connected. Hence the acrostic EPIC.⁵ Robert Webber sees the movement as younger evangelicals attempting to find a place in a changing world.⁶ Unlike the seeker-sensitive focus of the mega churches, the Emerging Church Movement is critical of programmatic approaches to evangelism with congregations housed in large facilities. Most of the movement’s church gatherings take place in homes, coffee shops, or remodeled warehouses. One representative of the Emerging Church Movement, Carl Raschke, argues that the Church Growth movement was yet another example of the church’s captivity to modernism as it relied “on rational strategies of technocratic engineering.”⁷

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger see the Emerging Church as a deconstructionist ecclesiology:

Emerging churches utilize the kingdom as a tool to deconstruct all aspects of life including virtually all church practices. They understand that the kingdom gives rise to the church, not the other way around.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 275-276.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 40.

⁶ See Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002). Also see Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁷ Carl A. Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2004), 156.

Forms and structures are variable in emerging churches, especially in comparison to new paradigm, purpose-driven and seeker churches, which keep most of the traditional structures intact. These older movements maintain an emphasis on paid senior pastors, the Sunday service as what constitutes church, outreach that focuses on lapsed suburban professionals, and the idea that Christians come to church, primarily understood as the church building. Utilizing the kingdom of God paradigm as a tool of deconstruction, emerging churches dismantle many forms of church that, viable at one time, increasingly represent a bygone era.⁸

The testimonies of numerous writers in *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* are stories of ministers or para-church leaders who became disillusioned by market-driven Church Growth and hard-edged Fundamentalism but were left cold by the sterility of mainline liberal Protestantism. Todd Hunter, formerly a national director for the Vineyard churches, describes his own background: "I was raised in an ultra-liberal United Methodist church, converted into a 'fundamentalist-light' church; experienced the full-blown, fire-hose blasting charismatic movement, sought to win others to Christ via crusades and the seeker movement; and drank deeply from the well of church growth theory."⁹ Spencer Burke spent twenty years on the staff of Mariners Church in Irvine, California – a church with over 10,000 in worship each weekend. Complaining of what he calls "spiritual McCarthyism," Burke rejected the rigidity of his fundamentalist past and resigned his position at Mariners in 1998 to form *TheOoze.com* as a space for the nurture of postmodern disciples. He writes, "I've come to realize that my discontent was never with Mariners as a church, but contemporary Christianity as an institution."¹⁰ Jay Bakker, son of the televangelist Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, and Chuck Smith, Jr., son of the well-know southern California pastor of Calvary Chapel, both contribute chapters describing their frustration with Evangelicalism and

⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2005), 96. I am grateful to a former student, Pastor Ross E. Johnson, for directing me to this book and for his ongoing conversation on the Emerging Church.

⁹ Todd Hunter, "Entering the Conversation," in *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic*, ed. Mike Yaconelli (El Cajon, CA: Emergent YS; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 42. In a similar vein to *Stories of Emergence*, see Webber, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*. The Webber volume has articles by five leaders of emerging churches – Mark Driscoll, John Burke, Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt, and Karen Ward – representing something of the theological diversity of the movement.

¹⁰ Spencer Burke, "From the Third Floor to the Garage," in *Stories of Emergence*, 29.

their embrace of what they see as an emerging form of Christianity that escapes the pitfalls of the past.¹¹

While the leaders of the Emerging Church are critical of what they describe as the rationalism of modernity, they are not anti-intellectual. The list of theologians most often cited by Emerging Church thinkers include Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf, Lesslie Newbigin, Nancy Murphy, James McClendon, John Franke, Robert Webber, N. T. Wright, David Bosch, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Frei, Clark Pinnock, and Walter Brueggeman. Scholars associated with Fuller Theological Seminary and a broad neo-Evangelicalism, especially those who see themselves as "post-foundationalists," figure most prominently in the shaping the theology of the movement.

A common theme in the *Stories of Emergence* is the identification of old-line liberalism as well as Fundamentalism, consumerist evangelistic techniques, evidentialist apologetics, and absolutistic ethics as relics of modernity. Raschke rather optimistically asserts, "To stand up to both liberalism and fundamentalism we need merely to overcome modernism."¹² McLaren anticipates critical readers who argue that his approach to Christianity is an evasive smokescreen for a denial of historic tenets of biblical faith. He writes, "Speaking of smoke, this book suggests that relativists are right in their denunciation of absolutism. It also affirms that absolutists are right in their denunciation of relativism. And then it suggests that they are both wrong because the answer lies beyond both absolutism and relativism."¹³ Like his mentor, the recently deceased Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz, McLaren takes it as a given that postmodernism is now normative and that theology must adapt itself accordingly.¹⁴ Such an adaptation is what McLaren seeks to accomplish in *A Generous Orthodoxy*. While the subtitle of his book is admittedly a

¹¹ Jay Bakker, "Shocking, Unexpected Grace," in *Stories of Emergence*, 181-191, and Chuck Smith, Jr., "But Can We Get There from Here?" in *Stories of Emergence*, 87-99.

¹² Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 32. Against such optimism in regard to postmodernity, Oswald Bayer argues, "Postmodernity not only dismisses modernity, it also is permeated with it. . . . Many of our contemporaries therefore still live bodily in modernity, but intellectually and psychologically in postmodernity." Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (Spring 2007): 5-6.

¹³ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 38.

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 169-171. For an insightful critique of Grenz and other Evangelicals who embrace postmodernism, see David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

mouthful, and a confusing mouthful at that, it does indicate how the author sees theology and church life configured in postmodernity.

McLaren holds that such a reconfiguration of theology is necessary for the sake of Christian mission. Hence, the first item in his subtitle is "missional." Critical of both the conservative preoccupation with "Jesus as the personal Savior" and the liberal captivity to modernity, McLaren sees missional Christianity as both communal and cosmic. If Evangelicals were too narrow in their focus on salvation as personal redemption and liberals too "this worldly" in their efforts to build a humane society, then Emerging Christianity will endeavor to evangelize unbelievers into an authentic community that is historically rooted and relevant while transcending time and space. The cosmic nature of this community leaves open the question of who is in and who is out. The old debates between universalism and salvation through faith in Christ alone are rendered futile.

Evangelical is the second descriptive word for McLaren. Hesitating to identify himself as an "an Evangelical of the big-E type"¹⁵ – for this would place him in league with the Religious Right and Fundamentalism – McLaren nevertheless cherishes an evangelical identity that is characterized by a high respect for the Scriptures, an intimacy with God, and a passionate desire to share Christ with others.

McLaren sees himself as Post/Protestant. With this pair of words, he describes himself as one who is protesting or "pro-testifying,"¹⁶ to use his words, so that the Christian community might be restored to God's heart. McLaren inquires, "What might such 'post-Protestant Christianity' be like? People like you and me can, with God's help, be the ones to help answer that question in the coming decades, not just by what we say but how we live – and especially how we love our neighbors."¹⁷

According to McLaren, the Liberal/Conservative divide within Christianity reflects an unhealthy reactivity with conservatives responding to the worst in liberalism and vice versa. Conservatives sought to establish the truth claims of Christianity against the acids of modernity while liberals became far too complacent with modernity. Both engaged in heroic attempts to preserve Christian faith but at a price that was too high. Thus McLaren writes,

¹⁵ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 116.

¹⁶ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 127.

¹⁷ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 130.

When I imagine what a generous orthodoxy can become, I realize I must seek to honor both conservative and liberal heroism. And when I do, I want to consider myself both liberal and conservative. I must learn from their mistakes, and when I do, I don't want to be boxed in either category. Instead they can look up for a higher way and look ahead to the new fields of opportunity and challenge that stretch from here to the horizon, where the terms *post-conservative* and *post-liberal* may be helpful for a while, and then the whole polarizing vocabulary can be, I hope, forgotten.¹⁸

McLaren sees a convergence between these polarities at least imaginable from an Emerging Church perspective.

Mystical/Poetic is the category McLaren uses to describe the approach to theology in the Emerging Church. A non-prosaic faith will be characterized by imagination and intuition, awe and reverence. It will move beyond the arid categories of rationality and live within an unseen universe where truth is poetry, not fact. It is in this sense that McLaren wishes to see himself as biblical. The inspiration of the Scriptures will no longer be a proposition to be debated by fundamentalists and liberals but a reality demonstrated by the power of the biblical narrative to inspire mission and generate a community of good works. Biblical truth will be experiential truth.

This leads McLaren to declare himself as Charismatic/Contemplative. At this point, McLaren reflects the place of Pentecostalism in his own life. It was from the Pentecostals and Charismatics within mainline denominational groups, such as the Episcopal parish where he maintained membership for a time, that he came to see that the Spirit of Jesus "is real, active, powerful, present and wonderful."¹⁹ There he learned that the Spirit is "one step beyond the normal."²⁰ Yet he laments that charismatic Christianity could not live up to the expectation always to deliver a high-voltage experience and that all too often excitement was turned into fatigue as religious salesmanship created a market of charismatic consumers. Sometime more was needed to ground and supplement the elusive energy of the charismatic Christians. This, McLaren believes, is found in contemplative spirituality. He writes, "If charismatics gave me my high school diploma in the ways of the Spirit, it was from Catholic

¹⁸ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 140.

¹⁹ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 174.

²⁰ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 175.

contemplatives that I earned an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts of the Spirit."²¹

In light of his previous critique of Fundamentalism and mainline Protestantism, the next pair of words might come as a surprise. McLaren professes to be a Fundamentalist/Calvinist. Yet in embracing these labels, McLaren redefines them by claiming that Fundamentalism was originally a movement attempting to create unity on five points thought to be fundamental to Christianity and thus allowing freedom in doctrinal matters thought to be less important. "For me," McLaren writes, "the fundamentals of the faith boil down to those given by Jesus: *to love God and to love our neighbors.*"²² Although he is troubled by what he sees as philosophical determinism in the theology of John Calvin, he expresses appreciation for the intellectual rigor of Calvinism and its commitment to the notion of *semper reformanda*, the church is always reforming. In keeping with this spirit, McLaren offers his own rewrite of TULIP (T—Triune Love; U—Unselfish Election; L—Limitedless Reconciliation; I—Inspiring Grace; P—Passionate, Persistent Saints). "Reforming in this way, the Reformed faith of today would be both revolutionized and revolutionary, a nightmare to some, a dream for others. Be that as it may, I would hope that these are already in fact the true colors of the best of the Reformed tradition."²³

McLaren claims that he is an "Anabaptist/Anglican." He sees in the Anabaptists a strong emphasis on personal commitment, an understanding of faith as a way of life that is embodied in a community willing to posture itself against modernity in a radical way, and a peace ethic. He appreciates Anglicanism for its ability to practice beauty in the liturgy and its skill at living within the tension of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in such a way as to allow for compromise within an ecclesial structure that remains communal. McLaren also sees himself as a Methodist, for this tradition combines personal piety with concern for the poor. Within Methodism, McLaren sees a catalytic energy that will enrich emerging communities of faith:

[I]t will empower "lay" people, realizing that baptism itself is a kind of ordination to ministry and that the purpose of discipleship is to train and deploy everyday apostles. And like the earliest Methodists, it will see discipleship as the process of reaching ahead with one hand to find a

²¹ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 175.

²² McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 184.

²³ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 197.

mentor a few steps up the hill, while reaching back with the other to help the next brother or sister in line who is also on the upward path of discipleship.²⁴

Confessing that he had to lay aside a host of Protestant prejudices, McLaren adds "Catholic" – both with a little c and a big C – to his list of descriptors. From Catholicism, McLaren asserts that he has learned to appreciate the unity and holiness of the church, as well as an appreciation for the sacraments, liturgy, tradition, and the place of Mary. It was the catholic influence that led McLaren to introduce the recitation of the Nicene Creed and other liturgical elements to the worship at his Cedar Ridge Church. He also notes that it is from Roman Catholics that other Christians can learn how to party and how to deal with scandal.

The final descriptive phrases in McLaren's subtitle move away from confessional and denominational labels to more general categories. "Why I Am Green" (chapter 16) asserts the author's appreciation for nature and the need for Christians to articulate an ecologically-sound doctrine of creation. "Why I Am Incarnational" (chapter 17) does not deal so much with classical distinctions of the two natures in Christ as it does with God identifying himself with humanity in the person of Jesus, of God becoming welcoming and hospitable in Christ and the implications that this has for missional Christianity. The book concludes with McLaren's apologetic, "Why I Am Emergent" (chapter 19), and two short chapters that offer a prognosis for the future.

In examining *A Generous Orthodoxy* and other texts produced by McLaren and those more or less identified with the Emerging Church Movement, several key themes surface that are reflective of contemporary spirituality. There is an ecumenism which is both eclectic and elastic. As has already been observed in McLaren, particular themes from a variety of Christian traditions are highlighted so as to form a mosaic of beliefs that complement rather than contradict each other. It remains to be seen how expansive this Emerging ecumenism is. In his discussion of missions and the relationship of Christianity to other religions, McLaren is most generous, but is he orthodox? Setting St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:22 ("I have become all things to all men that by all possible means I might save some") against the particularity of Jesus is the move that McLaren finally makes and it is not difficult to see why his critics accuse him of

²⁴ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 200.

universalism.²⁵ Here it seems that McLaren is reflecting a sentiment expressed by several of his neo-Evangelical mentors.

In their book *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Stanley Grenz and John Franke suggest that the Spirit who speaks through the Scriptures is also communicating through creation:

Because the life-giving Creator Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit's voice can conceivably resound through many media, including the media of human culture. Because Spirit-induced human flourishing evokes cultural expression, we can anticipate in such expressions traces of the Creator Spirit's presence. Consequently, we should listen intently for the voice of the Spirit, who is present in all of life and therefore 'precedes' us into the world, bubbling to the surface through the artifacts and symbols humans construct.²⁶

Another Evangelical theologian, Amos Young contends that it is possible to discern the work of the Spirit in other religions.²⁷ These arguments, although less nuanced, are expressed by McLaren in his discussion of Christianity and world religions. As McLaren sees it, charity drives him to adopt a dialogical rather than conversional approach to missions. In McLaren's model, Christ brings to perfection that which the Spirit has already initiated at some level in human culture.

Missions in the paradigm of the Emerging Church is not about bringing the faith-creating word of the gospel to those who are without Christ. Rather, it is relational. It is entering into friendships and conversation so that the presence of Christ may be identified and celebrated. As Raschke puts it, "the unknown gods of contemporary culture do not have to be resisted so much as renamed, reclaimed, and redeemed."²⁸

Emerging Church thinkers see it necessary to make a shift away from theological propositions to a theological narrative. Here, of course, they are drawing on a methodology that has been in vogue in mainline circles for

²⁵ See Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 168-169. Also see R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 143-155.

²⁶ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 162.

²⁷ Amos Young, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105-128. One Emerging Church leader, Spencer Burke, tells the story of going to a Buddhist temple with members of his church and practicing guided meditation in order to celebrate the many ways God is revealed. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 132-133.

²⁸ Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 164.

several decades. Propositional theology is seen to be an artifact of the Enlightenment while the narrative approach is argued to be both more biblical and more congenial to the postmodern period. Meaning is said not to be found in doctrinal asserts but in stories that are constitutive of reality. Propositional claims are said to be rationalist while narrative is experiential.²⁹ These stories "are not about what happened," writes Mike Yaconelli. "They're about what is going on inside us. They're about the deep hiding places in us that show up and reveal not only us, but God's fingerprints on our lives."³⁰

Related to the shift from propositional truth to experiential truth is the openness to the mystical in the Emerging Church. Often this is expressed by an appeal to the emotive as subjective truth is held to be congenial to the gospel. One of the ironies in Emerging Church thinking is that in spite of their probing criticisms of traditional Evangelicalism, there remains a strong attachment to a religion characterized by intuition and feeling. Both the Jesus People of the 1970s and the Charismatic Movement are hailed as precursors of a genuinely postmodern Christianity. Raschke lauds the revivalism of Charles Finney as a helpful slice of the Evangelical tradition that remains as part of the heritage of the Emerging Church. He compares the polemics of Finney's contemporary, Albert B. Dod of Princeton Seminary, on revivalism with that of present day Evangelicals on the Emerging Church:

²⁹ Note the observation of Colin E. Gunton: "It must be realized, however, that the anti-foundationalist song is the voice of a siren. The allusion to fideism indicates the perennial weakness of non-foundationalist epistemologies. They may appear to be attempts to render their content immune from outside criticism and so become forms of intellectual sectarianism. In other words, they may appear to evade the challenges of the universal and objective, and to run the risk of the rank subjectivism and relativism into which their extreme representatives have fallen. Theologically speaking, they evade the intellectual challenge involved in the use of the word God." *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 134. Gunton maintains, "The confusion of foundation with foundationalism may be at the root of the finally unsatisfactory appeal in much recent theology to narrative, for example in Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985). The problem with such appeals is that they either succumb to some form of subjectivism ('I have my story, you have yours') or they introduce in 'narrativity' an implicit and not always acknowledged form of foundationalism." *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 135 n. 6.

³⁰ Mike Yaconelli, "Introduction: The Illegitimate Church," in *Stories of Emergence*, 20.

Finney and the revivalists of his day understood that rhetorical intensity and the aesthetics of worship have a lot more to do with prompting conversion than forcefulness of apologetics. This same spookiness that the journalist conveys in sketching the night scene at the frontier camp meeting compares with what might be written today about postmodern worship and prayer assemblies.³¹

The experiential is said to lead to an intimacy with God so that, in the words of Raschke, “faith is the gesture that seeks to speak to God rather than about God.”³²

Worship in the Emerging Church is experiential, often marked with the use of icons and candles, incense and contemplative chant, as well as contemporary praise songs and the place for personal testimonies.³³ There is both order and spontaneity in liturgical assemblies that tend to be formed as intimate cell groups rather than large performance-oriented audiences. Little is made of Baptism. The Lord’s Supper is seen as a communal meal enacting hospitality.

In Emerging Church theology, salvation is defined primarily with therapeutic images rather than redemptive ones. The language of sin is seldom employed and, when it is used, it generally describes injury or offense against self, the neighbor, the community, or creation. It is seen as victimization or brokenness or perhaps as disobedience or rebellion but not as unbelief. So while the cross and resurrection still has a prominent place within the Christian narrative, the overriding conceptuality is not atonement and the forgiveness of sins but the Spirit-led life in the kingdom of God. The gospel is variously defined, often with references to the work of N. T. Wright who is seen as offering a narrative interpretation of the New Testament that is centered in the presence of the coming kingdom.

³¹ Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 175.

³² Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 56.

³³ See the description by Sally Morgenthaler, “Emerging Worship,” in *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*, ed. Paul A. Basden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 217–230. On pages 225–226, Morgenthaler writes of emerging worship: “Essentially, it is a wholesale deconstruction—the dismantling of a multicuity of worship forms (both pre-Reformation and post-Reformation) followed by the postmodern art of pastiche: creating something unprecedented out of the pieces at hand. Add to that a strong penchant for paradox (the juxtaposition of seeming opposites) and eclecticism (the combination of seemingly distant and unrelated elements) and you get a palette of colors that is virtually endless. Scared and secular, diverse geographies and ethnicities, past and present, celebration and lament, extreme participation and silence—these all recombine in emerging worship services for the express purpose of exalting God.”

Joel McClure offers this definition: "The gospel is that God wants you to help solve that problem, to participate with God through redeeming acts."³⁴ Another Emerging Church leader explains, "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."³⁵ The language of the Emerging Church is not shaped by the vocabulary of grace and faith but of acceptance and participation. Finally, McLaren argues that God's final judgment does not depend on Christ's work on the cross but on "how well individuals have lived up to God's hopes and dreams for our world and for life in it."³⁶

Emerging Church thinkers draw heavily on the writings of James McClendon, a Baptist theologian, in particular on the first volume—devoted to ethics—of his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. McClendon argues that the church is a community which is "understood not as privileged access to God or to sacred status, but as a sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ."³⁷ Numerous Emerging Church writers echo McClendon. McLaren writes:

[McClendon] begins with *Ethics* because a community of faith, in order to exist as a community at all, must have virtue sufficient to forgive, reconcile, and otherwise get along. Without roots in virtue, without practices that strengthen virtue, and without participatory experience of community made possible by virtue, no one is spiritually prepared to explore doctrine or pursue mission, McClendon implies. From this narrative perspective, the practices of humility, compassion, spirituality, and love—which develop only in community—are essential to a good and healthy theology, more primal and important than scholarship, logic, intellect.³⁸

However exotic and even eccentric the Emerging Church might appear to be on the surface, I would suggest that it fits within the context of the

³⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 56.

³⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 54. On this point, also see Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 218–232.

³⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 166–167.

³⁷ James William McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 28.

³⁸ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 290.

general landscape of North American notions about spirituality.³⁹ It is not nearly as counter-cultural as its promoters advertise it to be. It is eclectic, consensual, affirming of self, open, optimistic, and pragmatic. Mark Ellingsen has argued that, in North American spirituality, "Select religious teachings are merely a vehicle for supplementing generally sound life instincts."⁴⁰ This is amply demonstrated in the literature of the Emerging Church.

In his catalogue of all the things that he is, McLaren left out the Lutheran label.⁴¹ Some might argue that Lutherans are just easy to over look—"remarkably unremarkable" or extraordinarily ordinary, according to the description of Mark Noll.⁴² It could be that McLaren does not know much about Lutherans, or maybe he does not know what to do with Lutheran theology. Perhaps it just does not fit with his paradigm. Might it be that Luther (if not Lutheranism) is too radical for the Emerging Church?

Luther, in fact, made a radical move as he began with doctrine, not life, as he worked not with human authenticity but with authentic words from God in law and gospel. Ethics are not salvific, but God's doctrine is. Hence Luther writes in his lectures on Galatians:

Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery, mixed, as the saying goes, "with vinegar." Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7); here forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is

³⁹ For descriptive and critical accounts of contemporary spirituality from a Lutheran perspective, see James M. Kittelson, "Contemporary Spirituality's Challenge to *Sola Gratia*," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995): 367-390; Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Road Less Traveled? Reflections on the Enigma of Lutheran Spirituality," in *Let Christ Be Christ: Theology, Ethics and World Religions in the Two Kingdoms: Essays in Honor of the Sixty-Fifth Birthday of Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, CA: Tentatio Press, 1999), 129-140; and Paul Roem, "Augustine and Luther for and against Contemporary 'Spirituality,'" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30 (2003): 96-104.

⁴⁰ Mark Ellingsen, *Blessed Are the Cynical: How Original Sin Can Make America a Better Place* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 122.

⁴¹ However, on the back-cover endorsement of Nathan C. P. Frambach's *Emerging Ministry: Being Church Today*, McLaren does state: "Many of us believe that Lutherans have an essential and unique role to play in the emerging church." Frambach, a professor at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, published his book with Augsburg Fortress Publishers in 2007.

⁴² Mark Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* 20 (1992): 31.

worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches.⁴³

Orthodoxy can never be so generous as to set aside God's doctrine. That would be unbelief. On the other hand, the arena for generosity is life, where sin abounds. There, Luther argues, charity is to prevail as Christians endure and bear the sins of the neighbor.

Missing Luther's radical move, the Emerging Church begins with life not doctrine, and with ethics not faith. While claiming to be generous, open, and tolerant, McLaren—with his incessant focus on the necessity for authentic discipleship, obedience rather than knowledge, and lives characterized by compassion—slips into a rigidity that is unattainable. While the language might sound inclusive and undiscriminating, it is the language of the law. Is it not the case that if one scratches an antinomian, a legalist will be found underneath the surface? Or, as George Marsden observes in his study, *The Soul of the American University*: "Pluralism remains a basis for imposing uniformity."⁴⁴ The Emerging Church is not nearly as free from the dreary moralism that they decry. Gerhard Forde has helpfully observed that those who begin with the presupposition of freedom end in bondage.⁴⁵ Only a theology that begins with the presupposition that humanity is in bondage can end in freedom—the freedom of the Spirit.

For all of its rhetoric of the Spirit, the Emerging Church is a specimen of postmodern spirituality.⁴⁶ This spirituality is more of the human spirit than

⁴³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 27:41-42. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

⁴⁴ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 436.

⁴⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 44.

⁴⁶ In contrasting Christian faith with contemporary spirituality, David Wells argues: "In religion of a Christian kind, we listen; in spirituality of a contemporary kind, we talk. In religion of a Christian kind, we accept a gift; in spirituality of a contemporary

the Holy Spirit; it is a spirituality that seeks to be free and questing but finally succumbs to its own legalisms. Enthusiasm is always suffocating. In contrast, Scripture states that "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17).

I suggest that the Lutheran alternative is to reclaim a robust doctrine of vocation, a doctrine which is so often neglected. Vocation is the work of the Spirit, his calling to faith and life. Edmund Schlink began his dogmatics with the locus on the Holy Spirit, which was indicative of the fact that theology does not begin with our speculation but with the Spirit who has called us to faith by the gospel.⁴⁷ We cannot by the potency of our reason or by the depth of our conviction come to know Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith by the gospel, enlightening and sanctifying us with his gifts. The same Spirit who calls us to faith also calls us to a life of love within the structures of creation, or the three estates as Luther calls them. Both dimensions of our vocation—faith and life—are devoid of what the reformers identified as enthusiasm.

We are called to faith in Christ not by a story of our own choosing or a narrative of our own communal construction but by a word that comes from outside of ourselves. It is not just a word about Christ but the word of Christ. It delivers the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. It creates faith in the hearts of those who hear it when and where it pleases God. The rationalism that the Emerging Church so much fears in modernity is absent in Luther's understanding of the work of the Spirit in and through the gospel, but Luther does not slide into a mystical enthusiasm divorced from history. He does not share the fear of the Emerging Church over assertions. Quite the contrary, as his well-known words in the *Bondage of the Will* indicate: "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them [Christians] from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death. . . . The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself

kind, we try to seize God. In the one we are justified by the righteousness of Christ; in the other, we strive to justify ourselves through ourselves. It is thus that spirituality is the enemy of faith." *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 161–162.

⁴⁷ See Edmund Schlink, *Oekumenische Dogmatik* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983). So also Norman Nagel: "The actual sequence is Third Article, Second Article, First Article. The Holy Spirit with the means of grace bestows the salvation gifts won for us by Christ. These gifts are received in faith. The life of faith is lived begiftedly, and so on then through the First Article and all its *bona creata*," Nagel, "The Spirit's Gifts in the Confessions and in Corinth," *Concordia Journal* 18 (1992): 236.

and all experience."⁴⁸ Both Jew and Greek found the cross to be a scandal; even so both the modernist and the postmodernist stumble over the proclamation of the crucified Jesus. Both seek after a form of accessibility and openness while God hides himself to reason and emotion.

Carl Raschke wrote, "By relativizing language and theories of signification, postmodernism makes it possible to honor *the immeasurable holiness of God* in a manner that modern philosophy never could."⁴⁹ Yet this claim still leaves man with the *deus absconditus*, the God of mystery and majesty who is a terror. A mere switch of linguistics will not suffice. The theologies of the Emerging Church are not radical enough; they still leave human beings as the subjects of the verbs. In these theologies, God remains the object of our reflecting and acting. Enthusiasm and human works are of one piece.

The Spirit who calls us to faith through the externality of his word also calls us to life in creation. Some within the Emerging Church have experimented with communal living. While such an arrangement is not characteristic of the movement in general, there is a distinctly monastic flavor here. Although critical of perceived isolationistic tendencies in Enlightenment Christianity, Emerging Church thinkers have not been exempt from a sectarianism of their own. Belonging and community are stressed. The community that is yearned for, however, transcends the ordinary structures of family, congregation, and civic sphere; it is the company of those who voluntarily embark together on a higher journey of a deeper, more authentic spirituality shaped by growing conformity to the life of Jesus. In this sense, the Emerging Church can be seen as a postmodern unfolding of Anabaptist movements in the sixteenth century and restorationist movements in the nineteenth century. It is not as novel as many of its adherents claim.

As Luther and the Lutheran Confessions understand vocation, it is not a call of the Spirit out of the world but the calling of the Spirit to live within the mundane estates of congregation, family, and government. Luther spoke of these orders as the most fundamental forms of human existence.⁵⁰ In his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* of 1528, Luther calls them "religious institutions"⁵¹ for they are sanctified by God's word for the

⁴⁸ LW 33:21, 24.

⁴⁹ Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 32.

⁵⁰ LW 1:103-104. See also Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998): 125-159.

⁵¹ LW 37:365.

service of the neighbor. They are spiritual, Luther says in *That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, for

all that our body does outwardly and physically, if God's Word is added to it and it is done through faith, is in reality and in name done spiritually. Nothing can be so material, fleshly or outward but that it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. "Spiritual" is nothing else than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or spiritual.⁵²

For Luther, the "thank, praise, serve and obey him" of the Small Catechism's explanation of the First Article (SC II, 2) comes to expression in the daily prayers and the table of duties at the end of the Catechism (SC VII-IX). The Third Article takes us to the Second Article and through it to the First Article.

There is a line in Adolf Köberle's *The Quest for Holiness* that is attributed to Luther: "When God is gone, the fairy tales arrive."⁵³ The postmodern period is a time of fairy tales. In particular, it is the fairy tale that we can be like God, creating our own reality, authoring our own stories, and having a hand in our own redemption. The Holy Spirit is "the shy member of the Trinity," to borrow the words of William Hordern and Frederick Bruner, for he does not preach himself but Christ.⁵⁴ The preaching of Christ does not create spirituality but faith, faith that is active in love for the neighbor. There is a difference.

⁵² LW 37:92.

⁵³ Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*, trans. John C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), 41.

⁵⁴ See Frederick Dale Bruner and William E. Hordern, *The Holy Spirit, Shy Member of the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984). Also recall Luther's words in his John sermons: "Here Christ makes the Holy Spirit a Preacher. He does so to prevent one from gaping toward heaven in search of Him, as the fluttering spirits and enthusiasts do, and from divorcing Him from the oral Word or the ministry. One should know and learn that He will be in and with the Word, that it will guide us into all truth, in order that we may believe it, use it as a weapon, be preserved by it against all the lies and deceptions of the devil, and prevail in all trials and temptations. . . . The Holy Spirit wants this truth which He is to impress into our hearts to be so firmly fixed that reason and all one's own thoughts and feelings are relegated to the background. He wants us to adhere solely to the Word and to regard it as the only truth. And through this Word alone He governs the Christian Church to the end." LW 24:362.