

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN MCLAREN

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CTR: Can you define the Emergent Church movement for those of us who are uncertain of its nature?

McLaren: Church attendance is stagnant or declining in the U.S., and it has sunk to historic low levels in Europe and many other parts of the world. It appears that the church is growing rapidly where pre-modern people enter modernity, but where modern people move into a postmodern cultural milieu, the Christian faith has not yet understood or engaged the questions they're raising. So, many of us are seeking to faithfully incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ—the gospel of the kingdom of God available to all through Jesus—to people in our mission context.

Really, we're just acknowledging and seeking to enter a new mission field - not on a new continent, but one that is emerging on all continents. So, in this sense, what people call "the emerging church" (a term I don't particularly like because it can sound divisive) is really "the church that is engaging with the emerging culture."

CTR: What do you see as the major deficiencies within traditional evangelical and denominational churches?

McLaren: I am deeply appreciative of everyone who is trying to serve God and do God's will. So, I am not prone to be critical of

people who are faithfully serving God. However, like anyone, I have concerns. One of my deepest concerns, because I do a lot of international work, is that here in America our churches have so identified themselves with American nationalism, and especially with a certain neoconservative ethos in the Republican Party. That kind of partisan alliance is dangerous, I believe. It puts us in the tradition of being a "civil religion" much like mainline Protestantism was in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Civil religions lose their prophetic voice. As a result, for many people—especially young people and highly educated people the word "Jesus" now means things it shouldn't mean: judgmental, angry, exclusive, unkind, lacking understanding, reactionary, violent, pro-war, anti-poor, and the like.

CTR: Who is doing church, particularly Emergent, right?

McLaren: I don't really think about this sort of thing. I think we are all a mess and we are all trying to do our best. Our best, however, is not very good. We all have a lot to learn. I praise God, as Paul said, for whoever is preaching Christ. I don't think there's one "right" way to do church. I think there are tiny house churches serving God in beautiful ways, and I think there are megachurches equally faithful in their service to God. Wherever there are signs of the kingdom of God, we should rejoice, whatever form they take.

CTR: Name a few of the theological thinkers, past and present, who have shaped your own beliefs and practices. In what ways have they impacted your life and ministry?

McLaren: In my early years, I was deeply influenced by Francis Schaeffer, C. S. Lewis, J. I. Packer, and R. C. Sproul. From them I learned that God welcomes us to use our minds in his service.

I did my graduate work on the Catholic novelist Walker Percy. He has had a huge impact on me. He introduced me to the modern-postmodern transition way back in the 70's. My research led me to study Søren Kierkegaard in some detail, and his work also left a lasting mark.

The writings of two missiologists, Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, had a profound effect on my thinking in the 1990's,

especially my understanding of the gospel and its outworking in culture. Also, the writings of Lamin Sanneh (from Africa) and Rene Padilla (from Latin America) have helped me a great deal. I believe we in the West have so much to learn from our brothers and sisters in the global south who have seen colonialism from its ugly side.

More recently, the works of N. T. Wright and Walter Brueggemann have enriched my reading of the Bible in profound ways. I love to read, so I feel this is a fantastic time to be alive.

CTR: Apart from your own books what else would you recommend one to read in order to get a proper understanding of the Emergent movement?

McLaren: Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs recently wrote *Emerging Churches*. It is by far the best introduction to the whole phenomenon. Also, it is smart to survey the websites and blogs connected with emergent, starting with *emergentvillage.com* and *amahoro.info*. One will link to another, so before long you can get a broad exposure to emerging voices.

CTR: How does your understanding of the kingdom of God affect your understanding of church?

McLaren: This is one of the most important issues that has arisen for me. Like many people, I formerly understood kingdom of God to refer to heaven after this life, with a kind of backlight cast on this life. Now, I see the kingdom as primarily being about God's will being done on earth, in history, with a forward light cast beyond this life.

I see the church as a community that teaches people to live in and for the kingdom, spiritually forming disciples who are agents of the kingdom in their daily lives, in their jobs, among their neighbors and even their enemies.

CTR: A lot of conservative religious leaders have voiced their concern about the Emergent movement. What are some of the common misunderstandings and/or misrepresentations you have read about your own views?

McLaren: It's very hard to summarize here. I've been shocked by the venom and unfairness of many responses. Often, it's clear that they have not even read my books, or else they have only read them seeking to find fault, not really trying to understand what I'm saying. Most pastors have had a few church members like this through the years; it's not pleasant!

I often hear people saying we deny the existence of truth (which is, frankly, ridiculous) or that we reject the Bible (again, ridiculous). Some say that we show no respect for Church tradition and others that we pay too much respect to tradition. Some reduce everything we're talking about to a rather esoteric and un-nuanced debate about epistemology. Some are concerned about me because they know that I am unhappy about the Religious Right's narrowing of the gospel's social impact to two or three issues, and I think the rhetorical strategy of the Religious Right has made evangelism harder here in America and around the world. If they think the Religious Right is the leading edge of God's work on the planet, they see me as someone who isn't with the program.

CTR: Why is presenting Scripture as story more effective with postmoderns than what you see as the traditional evangelical approach?

McLaren: This is a complex question that I can only scratch the surface on here. Let me say it like this: the Bible is not a book of analytical philosophy or systematic theology (This is not a criticism of either the Bible or these valuable fields of study, just an observation.). The Bible comes to us as a collection of Spirit-inspired literary artifacts that can only be properly understood in their historical context (which means "in the context of the story in which they occurred"). Jesus hardly spoke without using parables, which are works of short fiction. So, in inspiring the Bible, the Holy Spirit seemed to prefer a narrative approach. The apostle Paul, again and again in Acts, gives his testimony, which means he tells his story. So, I think many of us are simply rediscovering this priority in the Bible, and we are seeking to emulate it, and we are finding it connects.

There are other reasons too. By "the traditional evangelical approach," I assume you mean a propositional approach, where sermons are presented as points in an analytical outline, or where

the gospel is presented as four laws, five steps, or whatever. I have nothing against these methods, but as you said, they seem to get in the way for many postmodern people. So, since the Biblical method is very narrative, and since people in our mission field respond better to narrative than a more traditional approach, I think we are wise to adjust our methods, just as any good fisherman would during changing weather conditions.

CTR: Do you feel the battle for the Bible (particularly for inerrancy) that was fought a number of years ago was worth the effort? How do you respond to those who say you are now surrendering the ground that your evangelical forefathers of a generation ago fought so hard for, and won?

McLaren: This is a good but complex question. As with so many questions, how it is framed makes all the difference. I see the battle for the Bible as a skirmish in the battle between liberals and conservatives. But I see that battle as being part of a still larger battle.

Let me use this analogy. How important was the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War? Military strategists would agree, I think, that it was very important in the Vietnam War. But it was less important against the backdrop of the Cold War. And now, facing what is often (and I think unwisely) called the War on Terror, the Tet Offensive is hardly relevant at all.

Similarly, the battle for the Bible was part of the Cold War between mainline liberals and conservative evangelicals. In that way, I think it was important for conservative evangelicals to maintain their identity and not be absorbed by mainline liberals. I suppose that is still true, as is the reverse—that mainline liberals have unique characteristics that would be lost if they were absorbed by conservative evangelicals. (The latter may be more likely at this point than the former!)

But the old Cold War between liberals and conservatives, I think, is a distraction. It is a modern conflict, but another conflict has arisen, a new set of questions and challenges. Many on both sides of the Cold War are still in a fight to the death and don't seem to realize that a new situation is developing. As a result, both mainline Protestants and conservative evangelicals are equally

irrelevant to the emerging culture. Many evangelicals, I think, don't feel they are in danger at all; they are in the place of power, in with the White House, financially prosperous in nearly every way, on CNN or Fox News every night, and so on. But that is just where the mainline liberals were in the 60's.

Meanwhile, in both so-called liberal and conservative churches, teens and young adults are dropping out at similarly high rates, and the Church seems to have become the religious chaplaincy to a political party. I am sorry if that seems like an evasive answer, but that's how I see things.

At the end of the day, I think that neither liberals nor conservatives have taken the Bible seriously enough. Perhaps what was really going on wasn't the battle for the Bible at all. Perhaps what was going on was "The Battle between Two Ways of Interpreting the Bible." Maybe what we really need is a third way of interpreting the Bible that is both different from and available to both liberals and conservatives. Something to think about!

CTR: If emergent strategists feel that to reach postmoderns with the gospel one must abandon a presuppositional approach, how would they account for Francis Schaeffer's success in using that methodology to reach the first generation of postmoderns back in the late 1960s?

McLaren: I don't think I have heard anyone say we must abandon presuppositionalism. Probably a lot of people in the emergent conversation—like a lot of people not in it—wouldn't even know what presuppositionalism is. This is where these discussions quickly can become unfruitful and even counterproductive.

"Postmoderns" is a terribly abstract term, as is "presuppositionalism" (do we mean Cartesian foundationalism? Van-Tillian apologetics? Barthian fideism?). In high-altitudes of abstraction, we can easily think we are talking about the same things when actually we are not, or vice versa.

I believe Francis Schaeffer was effective for a number of reasons. First, he was brilliant and well-educated, and he used his God-given mind and education for the kingdom of God in a time

when many evangelicals were shockingly anti-intellectual and reclusive. Second, he listened. He listened deeply to people's questions and tried to understand them. Closely related, he treated people with gentleness and respect. He didn't call them names nor did he try to manipulate or coerce people. He was kind. Fourth, he was conscious of worldviews. He gently, but firmly, helped people see the incoherence or inconsistency of their worldview, and he tried to show the coherence and beauty of a worldview centered on Christ. Fifth, he loved culture. He appreciated the arts, and wasn't one to insult (or censure) works of art that he didn't agree with; rather, he took them seriously and used them to point out worthwhile things. Sixth, he was much attuned to history. To return to an earlier question, he emphasized the narrative dimension. He sought—imperfectly, as we all do—to understand Augustine or Aquinas or Kierkegaard or Sartre or Camus or Cage or whoever in light of their historical setting. This is good missiology, and I think these approaches are still very important today. In this way, I am very much Schaeffer's disciple.

Some people try to pit me and my friends against Schaeffer, but I think they are either misunderstanding Schaeffer or us. True, late in his life (with *A Christian Manifesto*, for example), Schaeffer went in some directions that disturbed me. But his love for people, his emphasis on community via L'Abri, his fertile and active mind, his deep rootedness in the Scriptures and his pursuit of what he called "true spirituality" are all qualities that I and my friends want to emulate.

CTR: What kinds of questions should young church leaders be asking as they minister in the twenty-first century?

McLaren: Here are a few, in no particular order: 1) What is a better alternative to either a) a private, personal spirituality unconnected to public life, and b) a public civil religion that compromises with partisan politics (of either the right or the left)? How do we live out the kingdom in the public sphere, learning from the mistakes of recent decades and from Christian history over centuries? 2) How do we make real disciples? Why are so many of our church members so mean-spirited? 3) What does the gospel have to say about the global economy, about the growing gap between rich and poor, about stewardship of the environment, about the growing threat of violence from both terrorists and anti-terrorists?

4) What new forms of church will be necessary to faithfully contain the ever-new wine of the Holy Spirit in our fast-changing world? 5) How can pastors sustain their own spiritual health in times of stress, change, and tension? 6) How can pastors develop friendships that sustain them in their spiritual disciplines?

CTR: What can we learn from other religions?

McLaren: This is a huge question, a good question, but one that I don't think I can do justice to in this limited space. We would need to talk about who "we" is, which other religion we are talking about, what kind of learning we are talking about, and so on. I was impressed with Pope John Paul II's answer to this question in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. I also think David Bosch addresses this wisely in *Transforming Mission*. I addressed it briefly in *A Generous Orthodoxy* and *Finding Faith* and *A New Kind of Christian*.

CTR: You have placed much emphasis on a dialogical approach to non-Christian religions. When must dialogue necessarily give way to proclamation? Would you list two or three principles for evangelizing Jews, Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus?

McLaren: One of the things I say in *A Generous Orthodoxy*—quoting the great South African missiologist David Bosch—is that dialogue doesn't exclude proclamation (or witness) but makes it possible. Perhaps some of us assume that proclamation means monologue, but I think that's a questionable assumption. Proclamation can occur beautifully in dialogue, as it did for Jesus again and again in the Gospels, or as it did for Paul in the book of Acts. Recently I have been involved in some fascinating dialogues with Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists. When I treat them with respect, when I show interest in hearing their story, when I try to understand what attracts them to their religion and what it adds to their lives, in each case they show a similar curiosity and want to hear my story—my "testimony" if you will—and I am given a chance to share my faith that I would not be given if I insisted on monologue, especially disrespectful or aggressive monologue. A Muslim imam, for example, explained to me the distinctives of his sect. I found a point of contact between the reform movement he was part of and Jesus' role as a reformer in Judaism. He was intrigued. He wrote me a long letter thanking

me, and said that he had always misunderstood Christianity, that now it made more sense to him. Our conversation continues today. I think of a woman who, when she first came to our church, described herself as a Buddhist. I met with her and asked to hear how she became a Buddhist. Later she told me, "Really, I don't know that much about Buddhism. I just tell Christians I'm a Buddhist so they'll leave me alone." Since then she has become a sincere follower of Christ.

As I understand what we call the Great Commission, it is not a call to simply communicate a message (or do an information dump or sales pitch), nor is it even a call to get people to "say the sinner's prayer." Rather, it is a call to make disciples—disciples being defined by Jesus as people who are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as people who are learning to practice all of Jesus' teachings. The challenges of disciple-making are very different when we're dealing with a nominal Christian who has grown up in Georgia as compared to a Muslim in Iran, a Jew in Manhattan, a Sikh in London, or a Hindu in India. Dialogue helps us to understand people so we can—guided by the Spirit—better relate the good news of Jesus to them. I guess I'd say in this way, it doesn't give way to proclamation, but makes way for it. In the process, of course, not only does our friend learn, but so do we. This mutual learning through dialogue is beautifully illustrated in the story of Peter and Cornelius, I think. It's worth going back to read Acts 10 and 11 again and again, because what Peter learned in his dialogue with Cornelius is then brought back to the Church at large. Perhaps this is just a different application of James's wise words about us being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Perhaps it has become too acceptable in many of our settings to launch quickly into angry monologues, with insufficient listening.

CTR: What is the one question that you wished you were asked more often about the Emergent Church, and how would you answer it?

McLaren: I wish people were more interested in the question of how the Religious Right has changed our evangelistic context. The name "Jesus" is heard differently now than it was thirty years ago because of the amazing "success" of the Religious Right. If I say "Jesus" to many of my friends, they don't think of someone

who came to forgive sin; they think of people who want to shame people for their sins. They don't think of someone who had special good news for the poor; they think of people who want to give every possible advantage to the rich because they think the poor are to blame, largely, for their poverty. They don't think of someone who overturned the status quo, but of people who represent the status quo. They don't think of someone who talked about turning the other cheek, but of people who defend pre-emptive violence. So, I wish people would seek to understand the rising dissatisfaction surrounding how the Religious Right has "re-branded" Christianity, and how Emergent and other conversations like it are seeking to rediscover the Jesus of the Scriptures and fairly represent him and his message to our world.