

Feature Article: JAE450

## NAVIGATING THE EMERGING CHURCH HIGHWAY

by Mark Driscoll

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, number 4 (2008). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

---

### SYNOPSIS

Wading through the entire emerging church milieu is incredibly complicated. In this article I seek to provide a simple but accurate means of navigating the emerging church highway by focusing on its four lanes and their leaders. For the purposes of this article I will define them as Emerging Evangelicals, House Church Evangelicals, Emerging Reformers, and Emergent Liberals. What the first three lanes have in common is theological orthodoxy. Churches in these lanes are not interested in reconsidering major Christian doctrines such as those that view the Bible as God's Word, God as triune, Jesus as God and the only means of salvation, humanity as sinful, all sex outside of heterosexual marriage (including homosexuality) as sin, and heaven and hell as literal, conscious, and eternal. In the fourth lane are the Emergent Liberals, who are most controversial and are not theologically evangelical. The three main leaders of this lane are Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and Rob Bell. The Emergent Liberal lane of the emerging church has drifted away from a discussion about how to contextualize timeless Christian truth in timely cultural ways and has instead come to focus on creating a new Christianity.

---

In 1997, I was a struggling church planter of the newly launched Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, when an evangelical networking ministry in Texas named Leadership Network invited me to speak at a conference for young pastors focused on reaching younger people. Having never even been to a pastors' conference, I was honored at the request. I spoke about the cultural transition from the modern to the postmodern world, rather than generational issues.

Much to my surprise, the topic hit a nerve and requests for media interviews, consultations, and speaking opportunities began coming in from around the country. At that time, Leadership Network hired Doug Pagitt to oversee what it called its Young Leaders Network. The initial team included Pagitt, myself, and Chris Seay, and soon we added Brian McLaren at Pagitt's invitation. Loosely affiliated with the team were men such as pastor and author Dan Kimball, youth pastor Tony Jones, pastor and [www.Ooze.com](http://www.Ooze.com) founder Spencer Burke, and blogger and itinerant pastor Andrew Jones. We began speaking around the country together at various conferences and churches.

Before long, I resigned from this team. Still in my mid-twenties, rather than traveling around the country telling others how to do ministry, I needed to focus my energies on caring for my pregnant wife, personally maturing, and improving the health of our struggling church plant. Furthermore, I had serious theological differences with some men on the team and was concerned about their drift from biblical truth. The team eventually split from Leadership Network and formed what is now known as the Emergent Village.

The conversation that began among generally younger pastors regarding how the church could best position itself to reach people who were increasingly more postmodern culturally has grown considerably.

What once was the equivalent of a dirt path that only a few young pastors walked on has become a four-lane highway, complete with a growing caravan of Christians merging onto their preferred lane behind their leaders in an effort to find a church for the postmodern world. In the remainder of this article I will seek to delineate the lanes and their leaders, though I would like to preface my remarks in four ways.

First, people mentioned in this article, with the exception of Rob Bell, range from acquaintances to friends. Although there are some theological disagreements among us to varying degrees, I do love each one and have found all of them to be gracious and kind toward me over the years. They care deeply for their families, churches, and friends.

Second, we all agree that in the past generation or two there has been a significant cultural shift in the prevailing worldview from modernism, which led to rationalism, skepticism, and atheism, to postmodernism, which has led to experientialism, pluralism, and spiritism. The ministry methods that succeeded in evangelizing people during the modern age simply are no longer working because the average lost person is culturally different than he or she was a few generations ago.

Third, I agree that churches and Christians need to assume a missionary outlook to ministry. By this I mean that not only should we send missionaries across the world to evangelize lost pagan<sup>1</sup> peoples, but we should also send missionaries across the street because the people there are lost pagans, too.

Fourth, the lines between the lanes of the emerging church highway are not always clearly marked, because the friendships between leaders in each lane compel them to refrain from a critical spirit; leaders even occasionally change lanes, depending on the issue. The lines are unclear, further, because the emerging church includes seemingly every form of church (e.g., house church, church-within-a-church, church plant, established church, liturgical high church, nonliturgical charismatic church) from every kind of Christian tradition (e.g., mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, evangelical, denominational, independent). As a result, there is great confusion that is only increased by the fact that the entire movement, or conversation, depending on who you ask, is referred to as the emerging church, and there is also a lane of the emerging church called the Emergent Village, which is a separate nonprofit organization. If that were not enough, the various lanes of the emerging church are now present throughout the world, and the theological conversations and explorations that are occurring via the Internet on everything from blogs to discussion boards are ever changing.

#### **FOUR LANES ON THE EMERGING CHURCH HIGHWAY**

Wading through the entire emerging church milieu, admittedly, is incredibly complicated; therefore, I will seek to provide a simple but accurate introduction to the emerging church in this article by focusing on the four lanes and their leaders. For the purposes of this article I will define them as Emerging Evangelicals, House Church Evangelicals, Emerging Reformers, and Emergent Liberals.

What the first three lanes have in common is theological orthodoxy. They are not interested in reconsidering major Christian doctrines such as those that view the Bible as God's Word, God as triune, Jesus as God and the only means of salvation, humanity as sinful, all sex outside of heterosexual marriage (including homosexuality) as sin, and heaven and hell as literal, conscious, and eternal. Therefore, I will briefly examine each of the three evangelical lanes of the emerging church and spend most of our time on the Emergent Liberals, who are not theologically evangelical and who are the most controversial.

#### **Emerging Evangelicals**

Emergent evangelicals are interested in updating worship styles, preaching styles, and church leadership structures so as to be relevant to postmodern-minded people. They do not place as much emphasis as do other "lanes" on actively engaging in their local culture and loving and serving people as the church. They are divided over such things as the role of women in ministry, the proper mode of baptism, and charismatic gifts. Emerging Evangelicals commonly begin alternative worship services within evangelical churches to keep generally younger Christians from leaving their churches. They also plant new churches to reach people who are not being reached by existing churches.

Leaders in this lane look to pastors and authors such as Chris Seay, Dan Kimball, Rick McKinley, John Burke, and Donald Miller, whose book *Blue Like Jazz*,<sup>2</sup> which deconstructed the evangelical subculture, has become a bestseller. The common critique of Emerging Evangelicals is that they are doing little more than cool church for hip young Christians.

### **House Church Evangelicals**

House Church Evangelicals are dissatisfied with the current forms of church (e.g., traditional, seeker-sensitive, purpose-driven, contemporary). They bolster their criticism of traditional church by noting that America is becoming less Christian, and Christians are not living lives that are markedly different from non-Christians, thereby proving that current church forms have failed to create life transformation. They subsequently propose more informal, incarnational, and organic church forms such as that of house churches.

House Church Evangelicals look to house church movement leaders such as Neil Cole and Shane Claiborne, who made the cover of *Christianity Today* for his efforts to encourage simple churches,<sup>3</sup> along with Australian missional authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. Perhaps the best-known House Church Evangelical leader is George Barna, who argues against such things as Sunday church services in a building with a pastor preaching a sermon in his books *Revolution*<sup>4</sup> and *Pagan Christianity?*<sup>5</sup> The common critique of House Church Evangelicals is that they are collecting disgruntled Christians who are overreacting to the megachurch trend and advocating a house church trend that works well in some cultures but has not proven effective in Western nations.

### **Emerging Reformers**

Emerging Reformers see the postmodern world as an opportunity for the church to practice the *semper reformanda* or “always reforming” cry of the Protestant Reformation. Emerging Reformers are charismatic in terms of spiritual gifts and worship and aggressive in church planting, particularly in major cities. Emerging Reformers, unlike all of the other lanes of the Emerging Church, are more firm on such things as gender roles that state that only qualified men may serve as pastors and preachers. Curiously, the September 2006 cover story of *Christianity Today* declared that the two hottest theologies among younger pastors in America are the Emerging Reformed and Emergent Liberal lanes.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to evangelical beliefs, Emerging Reformers have a commitment to the Reformed theological tradition as shaped by such historical figures as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, along with such broadly recognized evangelical leaders as Billy Graham, J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and John Stott. Emerging Reformers look to contemporary men such as John Piper, D. A. Carson, and Wayne Grudem for theology, along with Tim Keller and Ed Stetzer for missiology. They also look to church planting pastors such as Matt Chandler, Darrin Patrick, and me.

The common critique of the Emerging Reformers is that they are merely repackaging tired Reformed fundamentalism. Critics add that they are outdated in their understanding of gender roles, too narrow in their theological convictions, and do not really fit into the category of the emerging church at all.

### **Emergent Liberals**

Emergent Liberals range from the theological fringe of orthodoxy to heresy that crosses the line by critiquing key evangelical doctrines, such as the Bible as authoritative divine revelation, God as Trinity, the sinfulness of human nature, the deity of Jesus Christ, Jesus’ death in our place to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross, the exclusivity of Jesus for salvation, the sinfulness of homosexuality and other sex outside of heterosexual marriage, and the conscious, eternal torments of hell. Some emerging house churches are also Emergent Liberal in their doctrine.

Emergent Liberals are networked by organizations like the Emergent Village, directed by author and theologian Tony Jones, who is no longer a youth pastor but is involved at Doug Pagitt’s church, along with other prominent Emergent leaders such as Doug Pagitt, Karen Ward, and Tim Keel. The most visible Emergent Liberal leaders are Brian McLaren and Rob Bell.

The common critique of Emergent Liberals is that they are recycling the liberal doctrinal debates of a previous generation and are not seeing significant conversion growth, but rather merely gathering disgruntled Christians and people intrigued by false doctrine. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers this critique: “When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this [Emergent Liberal] movement simply refuses to answer the questions.”<sup>7</sup> Mohler further asserts that the “Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity.”<sup>8</sup>

Having outlined the four major lanes of the emerging church, I will turn my focus to the three most prominent leaders of the Emergent Liberal lane, two of which are key leaders of the Emergent Village.

**Brian McLaren.** Brian McLaren has a master’s degree in English from the University of Maryland. He was the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Baltimore/Washington D.C. area before leaving to focus on speaking, writing, and helping to lead the Emergent Village. Being older than many pastors in the emerging church, McLaren serves as a well-spoken father-figure of sorts. He is also a gifted writer. Having spent some time with Brian, I can attest to the fact that he is a personally gracious, whimsical, engaging, and enjoyable man. His influence is so great that *Time* magazine declared him one of the twenty-five most influential evangelicals.<sup>9</sup> In the foreword of McLaren’s *Generous Orthodoxy* (2006 edition), gay marriage advocate<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Tickle declares him to be the Martin Luther for the twenty-first century.

McLaren is admittedly eclectic in his theology and nearly impossible to define on most major theological issues, which makes him a lightning rod for interpretation and criticism. For example, in the subtitle to his most theological book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren explains himself as “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.”<sup>11</sup> Regarding McLaren’s continual theological ambiguity, D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and the author of more than forty-five books, has said,

It’s not because he [McLaren] doesn’t want to give any answer at all, it’s because he wants to give answers that are fuzzy. That is his intent. It’s not because he is a clever diplomat who is trying to avoid the toughest questions by using ambiguous answers of a diplomatic cast, but everybody who understands the language knows what he really means. He really does want all of these edges taken away. He wants to avoid what he perceives to be the angularity of confessional truth. And he’s very good at dancing around....At the end of the day, [he seems to avoid] some of the angularities of the Bible itself....Brian is so careful to dance around the edges that he’s shrewd enough not to come into the position where he simply says, “I know that’s what the Bible says, and I disbelieve it.” At some point, when a person does that, then categories like “heresy” are appropriate categories.<sup>12</sup>

Carson goes on to say that by skirting and being careful not to admit his disbelief in such issues, McLaren gives “the impression that they’re either not important or he wants to reinterpret them,” which makes Carson understand why others tend to apply such categories. He continues, “Do I think he’s saying some dangerous things—dangerous in the sense that he’s diverting people from things that are central to the Gospel, that are nonnegotiable as part of the Gospel—he’s diverting people away from those things? Yes, in that sense, I think he’s dangerous.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps one of the most frequent criticisms of McLaren is his unwillingness to agree that homosexual activity is sinful. When asked for his position on homosexuality by *Time* magazine he said, “You know what, the thing that breaks my heart is that there’s no way I can answer it without hurting someone on either side.”<sup>14</sup> In a story for *Leadership Journal*, he wrote, “I hesitate in answering ‘the homosexual question’ not because I’m a cowardly flip-flopper who wants to tickle ears, but because I’m a pastor, and pastors have learned from Jesus that there is more to answering a question than being right or even honest: we must also be...pastoral.”<sup>15</sup> McLaren goes on to say, “Frankly, many of us don’t know what we should think about homosexuality. We’ve heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence.”<sup>16</sup>

What is particularly troubling about McLaren's ongoing unwillingness to answer the gay issue is that he disguises his ambiguity and uncertainty as Christlike pastoral care. Having pastored a church for twenty-four years, it seems implausible that he would have no idea whether homosexual activity is acceptable or that he simply would have declined to answer any of the questions from his people wondering whether they could have gay sex over the course of those years.

*Theological Influences.* Speaking of his influences, McLaren has said, "I really like [Jesus Seminar fellows] Marcus Borg and John Dominic [Crossan; they] have a new book coming out called *The Last Week* [that] follows...what we call passion week, or holy week. It is really a great book....evangelicals tend to think that they're the only people who take the Bible seriously. I am so impressed with how seriously these guys take the Gospel of Mark, really the last week of Jesus. It's really stunning."<sup>17</sup> Marcus Borg is an avowed panentheist,<sup>18</sup> and John Dominic Crossan, cochairman of the Jesus Seminar, told *Time* magazine that after the crucifixion, "Jesus' corpse went the way of all abandoned criminals' bodies: it was probably barely covered with dirt, vulnerable to the wild dogs that roamed the wasteland of the execution grounds."<sup>19</sup> The subsequent "tales" of Jesus' entombment and resurrection, he says, were merely the result of "wishful thinking."<sup>20</sup>

McLaren appears to be influenced by other questionable works as well, which is another issue of concern. The fact that he recommends and endorses books filled with false teaching is also very concerning.

McLaren repeatedly has endorsed the book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*,<sup>21</sup> which says that the biblical categories for the explanation of Jesus' death were taken from paganism, then goes on to reason that we likewise should take present-day paganism, such as feminism and Marxism, as the categories by which we interpret the death of Jesus.

He also endorsed Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus*, saying:

Steve Chalke's new book could help save Jesus from Christianity. That's a strange way of putting it, I know. Not that the real Jesus needs saving. But when one contrasts the vital portrait of Jesus painted by Steve with the tense caricature drawn so often by modern Christianity, one can't help but feeling the "Jesus" of modern Christianity is in trouble. The Jesus introduced by Steve in these pages sounds like someone who can truly save us from our trouble.<sup>22</sup>

Chalke's book equates the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, that "Christ died for our sins,"<sup>23</sup> which is the essence of the gospel as defined in 1 Corinthians 15:3, to "a form of cosmic child abuse."<sup>24</sup> On this error D. A. Carson said, "I have to say, kindly but as forcefully as I can, that...if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel."<sup>25</sup>

McLaren's endorsement of Alan Jones's book *Reimagining Christianity* says, "Alan Jones is a pioneer in reimagining a Christian faith that emerges from authentic spirituality. His work stimulates and encourages me deeply."<sup>26</sup> In that book, Jones argues that the cross of Jesus should be "reimagined" because it is a vile doctrine: "The Church's fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end, and the place of the cross must be reimagined in Christian faith. Why? Because of the cult of suffering and the vindictive God behind it."<sup>27</sup> Jones goes on to say, "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."<sup>28</sup>

Also alarming is the fact that McLaren wrote the foreword to Spencer Burke's book *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*. Spencer Burke hosts Soularize, which he touts as the first postmodern emergent annual conference. In the foreword, McLaren says, "It's easy for inquisition-launchers to go on fault-finding missions....What's more challenging, and, regarding this book, much more worthwhile, is to instead go on a truth-finding mission. And, yes, even in a book with 'heretic' in the title, I believe any honest reader can find much truth worth seeking."<sup>29</sup>

In the book, Burke argues that hell simply does not exist: "The God I connect with does not assign humans to hell."<sup>30</sup> In the same vein, he says, "When I say I'm a universalist, what I really mean is that I don't believe you have to convert to any particular religion to find God."<sup>31</sup> He also rejects the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins: "Although the link between grace and sin has driven Christianity for

centuries, it just doesn't resonate in our culture anymore. It repulses rather than attracts. People are becoming much less inclined to acknowledge themselves as 'sinners in need of a Savior.'"32 Rejecting the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, Burke says God is "for anyone and everyone—Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, whatever....What counts is not a belief system but a holistic approach of following what you feel, experience, discover, and believe."33 Finally, he admits, "What's more, I'm not sure I believe in God exclusively as a person anymore either....I now incorporate a panentheist view."34 Scot McKnight, professor of Religious Studies at North Park University and an avowed fan of the Emergent Village35 says, "Is Spencer a 'heretic'? He says he is, and I see no reason to think he believes in the Trinity from reading this book. That's what heresy means to me."36

McLaren may have endorsed Burke's book because he himself does not believe that people will experience the conscious, eternal torments of hell (which Jesus spoke of more often than anyone else in Scripture) if they are not saved by Jesus. McLaren says that he is "trying to find an alternative to both traditional Universalism and the narrow, exclusivist understanding of hell [that unless you explicitly accept and follow Jesus, you are excluded from eternal life with God and destined for hell]."37 He goes on to say "we should consider the possibility that many, and perhaps even all of Jesus' hell-fire or end-of-the-universe statements refer not to postmortem judgment but to the very historic consequences of rejecting his kingdom message of reconciliation and peacemaking."38

**Doug Pagitt.** Doug Pagitt has worked closely with McLaren for many years. Pagitt graduated with a master of arts in theology from Bethel Seminary and now pastors Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis. In the book *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, to which we both contributed, Pagitt said that "what we [Christians] believe is not 'timeless,'"39 that theology will be "ever-changing,"40 and that "complex understandings meant for all people, in all places, for all times, are simply not possible."41 For Pagitt, theology is not timeless truth, a "faith that was once for all delivered" as Jude 3 says, but changing perspective.

Regarding human sinfulness, Pagitt asserts that in the historic conflict between Augustine, who defended the doctrine of original sin, and Pelagius, who denied original sin, Augustine's influence has had "too much sway."42 He also states that Pelagius was excommunicated from Rome "on false pretenses for personal and political, not primarily doctrinal reasons."43 Pagitt thus doctrinally defends Pelagius, who was denounced as a heretic at the Council of Carthage in 418 for denying human sinfulness.

Pagitt also has promoted the reconsideration of paganism, which is the belief that there is no distinction between Creator and creation, saying, "The idea that there is a necessary distinction of matter from spirit, or creation from creator, is being reconsidered."44 Romans 1:25 defines paganism plainly: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." The result of pagan thinking, according to the rest of Romans 1, is the approval of sexual sins including homosexuality; in many ways, sinful sex is the worship and sacrament of paganism. This helps to explain why during a conference called Emergence 2007 hosted by our church in Seattle and moderated by Krista Tippett from NPR, I asked Pagitt, "Is homosexuality an acceptable practice for a Christian?" Pagitt answered plainly, "Yes."

*Theological Influences.* Pagitt says that Henry Churchill King's book *Reconstruction in Theology*45 "encapsulated [his] sentiment about theology."46 In his day, King was among the premier liberal theologians. He taught and later served as president of Oberlin College, succeeding Charles Finney in each of those roles. Finney denied original sin and believed in the essential neutrality, if not goodness, of human nature.

King was among the heroes of liberal Christianity for reconciling Christianity with scientific evolution and historical and literary criticism, and rejecting the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement whereby Jesus died in our place to pay our penalty for our sins. King embraced the social gospel movement and the political agenda of *The New Republic* magazine, with which he was involved, and disdained the thought of God punishing sin. Perhaps most curious is that King's writings are littered with many of the same phrases commonly used by Emergent Liberals, such as "emergent evolution," "theology as conversation," "progressive revelation," and "personal relation."47

**Rob Bell.** The third and arguably most popular leader in the Emergent Liberal lane of the emerging church is Rob Bell. Bell received a master of divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan (not affiliated with the Mars Hill Church I pastor in Seattle), a best-selling author, the creative force behind the NOOMA videos,<sup>48</sup> and was dubbed the “next Billy Graham” by the *Chicago Sun-Times*.<sup>49</sup>

The relationship between Bell, McLaren, and Pagitt includes the latter two men having preached for Bell at his church. Rob Bell’s wife, Kristen, spoke of McLaren’s influence, saying, “I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible...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>50</sup> She goes on to say that during her and Rob’s rethinking of the Bible and Christian doctrine, their “lifeboat was *A New Kind of Christian*,” written by McLaren.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the virgin conception of Jesus, Rob Bell speculates that if “Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry’s tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time,” we would essentially not lose any significant part of our faith because it is more about how we live.<sup>52</sup> To be fair, Bell does not deny the virgin conception of Jesus, but he does deny that it is of any notable theological importance. This, however, is a dangerous move for four reasons, as I have written in my book *Vintage Jesus*,<sup>53</sup> and summarize as follows.

First, the only alternative to the virgin conception of Jesus offered in Scripture is that Mary was a sexually sinful woman who conceived Jesus illegitimately (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 8:41). Second, if the virgin conception were untrue, then the story of Jesus would change dramatically: we would have a sexually promiscuous young woman lying about God’s miraculous hand in the birth of her son, raising that son to declare he is God, and then joining his religion (Acts 1:14). Third, if we are willing to disbelieve the virgin conception, we are flatly and plainly stating that Scripture may contain mistakes, or even outright lies. In his book *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J. Gresham Machen said, “Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false.”<sup>54</sup> Machen went on to argue that “if the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible in any high sense, is gone.”<sup>55</sup> Fourth, in the early days of the Christian church, there was, in fact, a group who rejected the virgin conception of Jesus, the heretical Ebionites, and it is both unwise and unfaithful for a prominent pastor to accept a doctrine that the church has condemned as false.

Can a true Christian deny the virgin conception of Christ? As Mohler has said, “The answer to that question must be a decisive No....Christians must face the fact that a denial of the virgin birth is a denial of Jesus as the Christ. The Savior who died for our sins was none other than the baby who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of a virgin. The virgin birth does not stand alone as a biblical doctrine[;] it is an irreducible part of the biblical revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ. With it, the Gospel stands or falls.”<sup>56</sup>

*Theological Influences.* Bell has said, “For a mind-blowing introduction to emergence theory and divine creativity [which means we are cocreators with God], set aside three months and read Ken Wilber’s *A Brief History of Everything*.”<sup>57</sup> Curiously, McLaren similarly has said, “I am trying (with Ken Wilber’s help) to make clear that I believe there is something above and beyond the current alternatives of modern fundamentalism/absolutism and pluralistic relativism.”<sup>58</sup> McLaren enthusiastically recommends Wilber’s *A Theory of Everything* and *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*: “The way of thinking Wilber promotes and exemplifies—which he calls ‘integral’ thinking and which I call ‘emergent’ thinking—is powerful and important, in my opinion.”<sup>59</sup>

To learn more about Wilber I contacted author Peter Jones,<sup>60</sup> who is perhaps the leading Christian expert on paganism and the new spirituality. In a personal e-mail, he told me, “The arch pagan philosopher is Ken Wilber.”<sup>61</sup> Jones went on to say,

Wilber is a practicing Mahayana Buddhist who believes that reality is ultimately a non-dual union of emptiness and form. He speaks of “unitary non-dual (monistic) consciousness,” what some call

“the dharma of non-dual enlightenment,” he is a promoter of the *Perennial Philosophy* (...a name for the religion of esoteric paganism) and the “great chain of being.” Wilber promotes yoga, Zen, Kabbalah, [and] tantric Yoga (Hindu sex techniques). His think tank, *Integral Institute*, includes such luminaries as Deepak Chopra, Michael Murphy (of Esalen and a key figure in the Human Potential movement), Jon Kabat-Zin, Buddhist healer and professor of medicine at UMass, [and] Francisco Varela, a Chilean biologist and Tibetan Buddhist.”<sup>62</sup>

Jones went on to explain that according to Wilber (the author McLaren and Bell so enthusiastically recommend) in *A Theory of Everything*, Christianity is fourth among the nine levels of human evolutionary spiritual consciousness and will be outgrown and replaced with more enlightened understandings of God and the world, such as green egalitarianism, ultimately culminating in the integration of varying religions and ideologies into a global utopia of a sort—all without Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

## THE END OF THE ROAD

The multilane highway of emerging Christianity has continued its journey forward into the postmodern world with Emerging Evangelicals, House Church Evangelicals, and Emerging Reformers functioning as missionaries reaching out to postmodern people. The Emergent Liberals, however, have taken an off-ramp and now are not reaching out to postmoderns, but are blazing a new path in search of a new land of postmodern Christianity.

As Rob Bell has said, “This is not just the same old message with new methods. We’re rediscovering Christianity.”<sup>64</sup> Echoing this sentiment, despite two millennia of Christianity since the days when Jesus last walked the earth, McLaren says, “I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be ‘saved’?...I don’t think the liberals have it right. But I don’t think we have it right either. None of us has arrived at orthodoxy.”<sup>65</sup>

As the lane of the Emergent Liberals becomes its own highway that goes in a different doctrinal direction than historical orthodox Christianity, more and more evangelicals will turn around in order to drive in one of the three other lanes of the emerging church. It seems inevitable, though I am no prophet, that the Emergent Liberal lane of the emerging church will continue to drift away from a discussion about how to contextualize timeless Christian truth in timely cultural ways to an interfaith dialogue with less and less distinction between the religions of the world and the deity of Jesus Christ.

This is already encouraged by the teachings of McLaren, who said, “Jesus did *not* come to create another exclusive religion,”<sup>66</sup> and “I don’t hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, he has also written that

many Hindus are willing to consider Jesus as a legitimate manifestation of the divine [not the divine]...many Buddhists see Jesus as one of humanity’s most enlightened people [not God]....A shared reappraisal of Jesus’ message could provide a unique space or common ground for urgently needed religious dialogue—and it doesn’t seem an exaggeration to say that the future of our planet may depend on such dialogue. This reappraisal of Jesus’ message [as God] may be the only project capable of saving a number of religions.<sup>68</sup>

Since Jews do not believe Jesus is God, Hindus believe there are more than a million gods, and Jesus said He is the only God, it is inconceivable that one simultaneously could be a faithful follower of Jesus and a practicing devotee of any religion but Christianity.

To bring all religions together, Emergent Liberals will need to compromise the doctrinal truths of Christianity even further. McLaren essentially predicted this: “Christians in the emerging culture may look back on our doctrinal structures (statements of faith, systematic theologies) as we look back on medieval cathedrals: possessing a real beauty that should be preserved, but now largely vacant, not inhabited or used much anymore, more tourist attraction than holy place.”<sup>69</sup> One is left to wonder what will replace that historic Christian orthodoxy, since the Emergent Liberals have a low view of the divine inspiration, perfection, authority, and timelessness of Scripture, which Rob Bell says does not consist of “first and foremost timeless truths”<sup>70</sup> and McLaren says is “not a look-it-up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths.”<sup>71</sup>



Amid such great confusion, McLaren encourages us to look to Dorothy of *Wizard of Oz* fame rather than to Jesus for insight: “At first glance, Dorothy is all wrong as a model of leadership. She is the wrong gender (female) and the wrong age (young). Rather than being a person with all the answers, who knows what’s up and where to go and what’s what, she is herself lost, a seeker, often bewildered, and vulnerable. These characteristics would disqualify her from modern leadership. But they serve as her best credentials for postmodern leadership.”<sup>72</sup>

The cults of the modern world, such as Jehovah’s Witness and Mormonism, sprang forth from the infecting of biblical truth by modern philosophy. Unless there is correction, similar cults will spring forth from the infecting of biblical truth by postmodern philosophy. With Rob Bell and Doug Pagitt recently participating in the Dalai Lama’s Seeds of Compassion Tour by praying with members of other religions and sitting on the stage as panelists discussing the need for unity between all religions, I fear that they may have already passed the end of the road.<sup>73</sup>

## NOTES

1. By pagan I mean the worship of created things rather than the Creator God as Romans 1:25 explains. Practically, paganism is living one’s life in ultimate devotion to someone or something other than Jesus Christ. Examples include things created by God such as the environment, the human body and sinful sexuality, and demons in the name of vague spirituality along with things human beings create such as philosophical-like postmodernism and new spiritualities that accommodate all religions.
2. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).
3. Rob Moll, “The New Monasticism,” *Christianity Today*, September 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html>.
4. George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2006).
5. Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?* (Carol Stream, IL: BarnaBooks, 2008).
6. Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed,” *Christianity Today*, September 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>.
7. Albert Mohler, “‘A Generous Orthodoxy’ —Is It Orthodox?” *Crosswalk.com*, February 16, 2005, <http://www.crosswalk.com/root/1336217/page0/>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. David Van Biema, “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” *Time*, February 7, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/photoessay/>.
10. Tickle wrote, for example, that the work *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, by David G. Meyers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), left her “giddy with...hope and belief” (see <http://www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pageID=118>).
11. Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), cover.
12. D. A. Carson, interview by Kim Lawton, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, July 8, 2005, episode no. 845, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/interview2.html>.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Van Biema.
15. Brian D. McLaren, “Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response,” *Out of Ur, Leadership Journal Blog*, January 23, 2006, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html).
16. *Ibid.*
17. Brian D. McLaren, interview by Leif Hansen, *The Bleeding Purple Podcast*, January 8 and 12, 2006, <http://www.understandthetimes.org/ec/ecmclaren.shtml>.
18. See Marcus Borg, interview by Liza Hetherington, “Meeting God Again,” [http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/interviews/int\\_19970601.shtml](http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/interviews/int_19970601.shtml). Pantheism is a form of paganism that does not see a distinction between God the Creator and his creation, but rather considers creation to be the body that houses God so that the two are not separate.
19. Richard N. Ostling, “Jesus Christ, Plain and Simple,” *Time* (January 10, 1994), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979938,00.html>.
20. *Ibid.*
21. For example, see Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 47n17.
22. Brian D. McLaren, “Praise for *The Lost Message of Jesus*,” in Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
23. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
24. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.
25. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 186.
26. Brian D. McLaren, “Advance Praise,” in Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), back cover.
27. Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 132.

28. Ibid., 168.
29. Brian D. McLaren, foreword to Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), ix–x.
30. Spencer Burke, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*, 199.
31. Ibid., 197.
32. Ibid., 64.
33. Ibid., 130–31.
34. Ibid., 195.
35. McKnight is a member of the Emergent Village Coordinating Group. See <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/emergent-village-coordinating-group>.
36. Scot McKnight, "Heretic's Guide to Eternity 4," blog entry, Jesus Creed, August 8, 2006, <http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1319>.
37. Brian D. McLaren, "Brian McLaren's Inferno 2: Are We Asking the Wrong Questions about Hell?" Out of Ur, Leadership Journal Blog, May 8, 2006, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/brian\\_mclarens\\_1.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/brian_mclarens_1.html).
38. Brian D. McLaren, "Brian McLaren's Inferno 3: Five Proposals for Reexamining Our Doctrine of Hell," Out of Ur, Leadership Journal Blog, May 11, 2006, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/brian\\_mclarens\\_2.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/brian_mclarens_2.html).
39. Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology" in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 138.
40. Ibid., 121.
41. Ibid., 137.
42. Ibid., 128.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 142.
45. Henry Churchill King, *Reconstruction in Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1903).
46. Pagitt, 122.
47. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 65.
48. Nooma is the name of a line of short teaching videos featuring Rob Bell.
49. Cathleen Falsani, "Maverick Minister Taps New Generation: Wheaton Grad Reaches out in Films—Is He 21st Century Billy Graham?" *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 4, 2006.
50. Kristen Bell, quoted in Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today* 48, no. 11 (November 2004), 38, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html>.
51. Ibid.
52. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 26.
53. Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Jesus: Timeless Answers to Timely Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).
54. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 382.
55. Ibid., 383.
56. Albert Mohler, "Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth?" Commentary, AlbertMohler.com, [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2006-12-25](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-12-25).
57. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 192n143.
58. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 287.
59. Brian D. McLaren, "Brian's Recommendations," Brian D. McLaren, <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/books/brians-recommen/>.
60. Jones holds a master's of theology degree and a PhD in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is scholar in residence at Westminster Seminary in California, the director of Christian Witness to a Pagan Planet, and has written many books and articles on paganism.
61. Peter Jones, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2007.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Rob Bell, quoted in Crouch.
65. Ibid.
66. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 109.
67. Ibid., 264.
68. Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 7.
69. Brian D. McLaren, "Emerging Values," *Leadership*, July 1, 2003, 35.
70. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 62.
71. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 171.
72. Brian D. McLaren, "Dorothy on Leadership," Rev!, November/December 2000, <http://www.brianmclaren.net/emc/archives/imported/dorothy-on-leadership.html>.
73. See Seeds of Compassion, "InterSpiritual Day," [http://www.seedsofcompassion.org/involved/interreligious\\_day.asp](http://www.seedsofcompassion.org/involved/interreligious_day.asp).