

BRIAN MCLAREN AND THE EMERGING CHURCH

By Ken Silva

Introduction And Clarification

As this work is becoming more noticed, by way of introduction let me begin with a couple of important points of clarification. While I have laid out my criticisms of the Emerging Church movement (EC) I have always been fully aware of the difference between *Emergent-US*, the organization that Brian McLaren helped found, and the increasing numbers of loosely associated churches who would consider themselves part of this “conversation” of the Emerging Church. Therefore I do not necessarily intend blanket criticism of each of these churches, though I would ask them to research the origin of this movement/conversation and to immediately and prayerfully reconsider even being a part of the EC at all. Knowing this is quite unlikely, I reiterate that most of my criticism is (and has been) levied at the leaders/theologians within Emergent-US; and this is what I refer to as the Emergent Church as this is the most prominent group within the conversation.

That understood, I am not saying that (at the present time) everything within the EC itself is bad. For example, while I would never recommend it, much of Dan Kimball’s book *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* is within orthodoxy—at least for now. However, it is my considered opinion that when a movement begins in order to accommodate any rebellion against sound Biblical doctrine at all, it has been doomed right from the start. While there are many writers from an Evangelical background beginning to write on this subject I can you tell from months of studying their writings there will nothing gained by the typical “I believe they’re wrong but...” apologetic currently coming out of that camp. A large part of the reason the EC conversation began is to “talk” about ways we “do church” in this postmodern culture; but what one must realize is that virtually all of the influential theologians and leaders in the EC are at the very least neo-orthodox in their view of Holy Scripture. If you look at their literature you will see that while they do pay lip service to the authority of the Bible, in practice it ends up being what they “feel” Holy Scripture says and not necessarily what the text says.

Long story short; your discussions will end up just about the same as a dialogue with Mormon Missionaries. Whatever you quote from Scripture will only be quickly disgarded as simply “your opinion,” and most of what you say will only be heard through their own reinterpretations of historic orthodox Christian theology. The point being, if you do not understand this you will go away thinking you have made progress only to find out later that the terms you use have been redefined and you are really simply working at cross purposes. No, better to look at the fact that this movement has at its root a denial of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible and no amount of “conversation” will change the Lord’s absolute disgust for those who will not do what He says in His Word. Jesus has already pointed out to us – “*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit*” (Luke 6:43-44a).

With that in mind you will also want to carefully consider these words from Mark Driscoll who was among those who planted Mars Hill Church in Seattle. He was also part of the Youth Leader Network of the emerging church, which according to Driscoll was “put together by Leadership Network.” I urge you to listen closely to his firsthand experience:

I eventually had to distance myself from the Emergent stream of the network because friends like Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt began pushing a theological agenda that

greatly troubled me. Examples include referring to God as a chick, questioning God's sovereignty over and knowledge of the future, denial of the substitutionary atonement at the cross, a low view of Scripture, and denial of hell...

Also due out this spring is the book *Listening to the Beliefs of Emergent Churches*, edited by Robert Webber. In it, John Burke, Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt, Karen Ward, and I each contribute a chapter on the Trinity, Scripture, and Atonement and then critique each other. It will show the divergent theological camps in the emerging church and you can guess which author defended Pelagius, who was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Carthage in 418 for denying human sinfulness. You can also guess which one said that the atonement is best understood in nonverbal ways such as dancing and painting because faith apparently no longer comes by hearing the Word but by finger painting. (<http://theresurgence.com/?q=node/5>)

Guilt By Association

I am sincerely thankful that Roger Overton of the **A-Team** blog was kind enough to examine a few pieces I had written and to offer his short critique. In his assessment Overton felt that what I bring up thus far is little more than "guilt by association" and without the above clarification I can see what he would mean. However, we also must keep in mind concerning the case of Brian McLaren that his associations will tell you much about his beliefs and this has always been the main point in my discussions. And as far as guilt by association, there are plenty of people behind bars for just such circumstantial cases being built about their associations. For example a man who lives a lavish lifestyle, who has no apparent job, and who is constantly seen in the company of known drug dealers, in very good likelihood is participating in and profiting from their activities. At some point the Church of Jesus Christ in America had better grow a backbone and be willing to more thoroughly scrutinize those who would presume to instruct our pastors, such as a Brian McLaren, and insist that they are teaching *the trustworthy message as it has been taught* (Titus 1:9).

Since I cannot judge McLaren's heart then I must build my thesis that he is leaving evangelical doctrine in favor of a panentheistic theology that his good friend Leonard Sweet called "New Light" upon careful examination of his writings and closely scrutinizing the associations he makes. And yes the argument goes something like this: "But Sweet wrote *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic* years ago; that doesn't mean either of them would still think that way even if they once did." However, what seems to be missed here is that if you go onto Leonard Sweet's personal website right now you will see that this book is still offered there. Actually it is even featured. This means that if Sweet had retracted what he wrote the very least we could expect is that he would not allow it to be offered at his Site, let alone have a special section for it on the main page in *newsflashes*.

The Panentheism Of the New Age

I have previously attempted to make influential leaders within the Body of Christ aware—to no apparent avail—of the issue concerning a New Age panentheism which has crept into Brian McLaren's doctrine. So what I feel I must do now is to make this information as accessible as I can to the Church at large. In short, panentheism is the belief that the creation itself is part of God, though God Himself remains transcendent from it. What we mean to say here is that this is distinct from the pantheism which forms the basis for eastern religions like Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. Pantheism says "as drops of water together form the ocean, so we all together form God." In the strictest sense of pantheism God is actually an impersonal "it" similar to the force in

Star Wars, and the goal of most pantheists is to melt back into it as they return to the blessed nothingness of a Nirvana.

Pantheism on the other hand does see God as a conscious Being that created the universe but He created it as a part of Himself. Alan Jones, the author of *Reimagining Christianity* says God created it by breathing in because there was nowhere else that wasn't already God. This is the belief that appears more and more evident in the teachings of Brian McLaren upon thorough examination as you will come to see in the next article. As usual he personally is rather vague so one cannot completely pin him down, it truly is similar to having mercury in your hand. But it is precisely at this point where I call for people to finally begin to see that even this kind of evasiveness is not consistent with the role of an Evangelical Christian pastor (e.g. 2 Timothy 2:23-26). It is simply beyond question that McLaren claims the title pastor and that he is deriving income from his *sowing spiritual seed* (see—1 Cor. 9:11) amidst the Evangelical community. As such then we simply must investigate his doctrine, as well as his associations, and McLaren must be called to account for what he is teaching to the Church in Christ's Name. And as the time grows short, and as the sky grows ever more red each morning, we must be more direct in our approach here.

Please know I am not in the least a "conspiracy theory" person and I apologize if I may have seemed too harsh to some in approaching this critical emerging issue, but I simply see no need to have a "conversation" with people who are for the most part opposed to the concept of rational thought. So I offer that, if my opinion is correct that God is giving these men like Brian McLaren and possibly others in the Emergent Church leadership over to this pantheism of so-called New Light, then there wouldn't be a need for the vicarious penal substitutionary atonement in their minds. Think with me here, if you will, keeping in mind what I have already explained about pantheism; if the world is all a part of God anyway, then all that God created would *already* be divine. And since this would include mankind, then to the pantheist human beings would also have to be considered as a part of God, or deity. In eastern religions and in New Age terminology this is usually referred to the Higher or True Self, which you will see in a coming article is considered to be God.

A Morally Mystical Atonement

As a result of this doctrine of pantheism, at most all that would be necessary for a McLaren or a Sweet and/or an Alan Jones, would be a reconciling of the sinful living creation back to God. This would then explain McLaren's personal hedging when asked about the Gospel:

Theory of Atonement

Could you elaborate on your personal theory of atonement? If God wanted to forgive us, why didn't he just forgive us? Why did torturing Jesus make things better?

This is such an important and difficult question. I'd recommend, for starters, you read "Recovering the Scandal of the Cross" (by Baker and Green). There will be a sequel to this book in the next year or so, and I've contributed a chapter to it.

Short answer: I think the gospel is a many faceted diamond, and atonement is only one facet, and legal models of atonement (which predominate in western Christianity) are only one small portion of that one facet.

Dallas Willard also addresses this issue in “The Divine Conspiracy.” Atonement-centered understandings of the gospel, he says, create vampire Christians who want Jesus for his blood and little else. He calls us to move beyond a “gospel of sin management” – to the gospel of the kingdom of God. So, rather than focusing on an alternative theory of atonement, I’d suggest we ponder the meaning and mission of the kingdom of God. (<http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000149.html>)

One would expect this kind of non-answer if McLaren is subtly beginning to prepare his flock for the type of New Light pantheism I’ve been laying out for you. His view of the atonement would most likely be somewhere between the moral influence theory (God sharing in the sufferings of His creation) and the mystical theory (Christ’s death brought about a deep change on the subconscious level of man), which would certainly be consistent with the mystical bent of the EC as a whole. You see these things are really not new at all, and as you will also come to see they have already been refuted by some God-fearing and quite able teachers of the Bible.

In my next articles I’ll be discussing these issues further, but as I close for now, I admit this idea is “goofy” and New Age. However, before you write it off too quickly, I will be showing you contemporary teachings about pantheism from the writings of Sallie McFague and Marcus Borg. McLaren is on record as saying he’s familiar with McFague’s work and that he even enjoys it. Also in conjunction with *The Center For Spiritual Development* McLaren will be sharing platforms this spring and summer with Borg, who in addition to his foolish association with *The Jesus Seminar* is also a member of *The Living Spiritual Teachers* project.

And who else is a member of this association of “living teachers” but McLaren’s pantheistic friend Alan Jones. You say: Well, all of this is just guilt by association. You think? But I can tell you this; I myself am also a Christian pastor, as is McLaren, and I am also familiar with McFague’s work. I certainly have no problem whatsoever in telling the world that I most certainly do not enjoy the blasphemous idea that Satan possesses deity. For you see, this is the logical conclusion for the doctrine of pantheism. If the creation itself is actually literally part of God, and mankind is divine, then the Devil himself would also have to possess deity because he is also a part of that creation of God.

A little something to think about until next time...

Posted by Ken Silva, pastor-teacher at January 17, 2006 04:02 PM
Copyright © 2007 by Ken Silva. All rights reserved.