

Why We're Not Emergent (by two guys who should be) by Kevin Deyoung and Ted Kluck, Moody Publishers, Chicago:2008 (35 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols.)

INTRODUCTION

1. Are You Emergent?

After reading nearly five thousand pages of emerging-church literature, I have no doubt that the emerging church, while loosely defined and far from uniform, can be described and critiqued as a diverse, but recognizable, movement. You might be an emergent Christian: if you listen to U2, Moby, and Johnny Cash's Hurt (sometimes in church), use sermon illustrations from *The Sopranos*, drink lattes in the afternoon and Guinness in the evenings, and always use a Mac; if your reading list consists primarily of Stanley Hauerwas, Henri Nouwen, N.T. Wright, Stan Grenz, Dallas Willard, Brennan Manning, Jim Wallis, Frederick Buechner, David Bosch, John Howard Yoder, Wendell Berry, Nancy Murphy, John Franke, Walter Winks and Leslie Newbigin (not to mention McLaren, Pagit, Bell, etc.) and your sparring partner include D.A. Carson, John Calvin, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Wayne Grudem; if your idea of quintessential Christian discipleship is Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, or Desmond Tutu; if you don't like George W. Bush or institutions or big business or capitalism or Left Behind Christianity; if your political concerns are poverty, AIDS, imperialism, war-mongering, CEO salaries, consumerism, global warming, racism, and oppression and not so much abortion and gay marriage; if you are into bohemian, goth, rave, or indie; if you talk about the myth of redemptive violence and the myth of certainty; if you lie awake at night having nightmares about all the ways modernism has ruined your life; if you love the Bible as a beautiful, inspiring collection of works that lead us into the mystery of God but is not inerrant; if you search for truth but aren't sure it can be found; if you've ever been to a church with prayer labyrinths, candles, Play-Doh, chalk-drawings, couches, or beanbags (your youth group doesn't count); if you loathe words like linear, propositional, rational, machine, and hierarchy and use words like ancient-future, jazz, mosaic, matrix, missional, vintage, and dance; if you grew up in a very conservative Christian home that in retrospect seems legalistic, naïve, and rigid; if you support women in all levels of ministry, prioritize urban over suburban, and like your theology narrative instead of systematic; if you disbelieve in any sacred-secular divide; if you want to be the church and not just go to church; if you long for a community that is relational, tribal, and primal like a river or a garden; if you believe doctrine gets in the way of an interactive relationship with Jesus; if you believe who goes to hell is no one's business and no one may be there anyway; if you believe salvation has a little to do with atoning for guilt and a lot to do with bringing the whole creation back into shalom with its Maker; if you believe following Jesus is not believing the right things but living the right way; if it really bugs you when people talk about going to heaven instead of heaven coming to us; if you disdain monological, didactic preaching; if you

use the word “story” in all your propositions about postmodernism – if all or most of this tortuously long sentence describes you, then you might be an emergent Christian. [Pages 20-22]

CHAPTER 1. Journey: Are the pilgrims still making progress?

2. Is God Knowable?

The emergent agnosticism about truly knowing and understanding anything about God seems to be pious humility. It seems to honor God’s immensity, but it actually undercuts His sovereign power. Postmoderns harbor such distrust for language and disbelieve God’s ability to communicate truth to human minds that they effectively engage in what Carson calls “the gagging of God.” [D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*] For example, Tomlinson writes, “To say Scripture is the word of God is to employ a metaphor. God cannot be thought of as literally speaking words, since they are an entirely human phenomenon that could never prove adequate as a medium for the speech of an infinite God.” [Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*] In a similar vein, Bell writes, “Our words aren’t absolutes. Only God is absolute, and God has no intention of sharing this absoluteness with anything, especially words people have come up with to talk about him.” [Bell, *Velvet Elvis*]

Such statements fly in the face of redemptive history and nearly every page of Scripture. The God of the Bible is nothing if He is not a God who speaks to His people. To be sure, none of us ever infinitely understand God in a nice, neat package of affirmations and denials, but we can know Him truly, both personally and propositionally. God can speak. He can use human language to communicate truth about Himself that is accurate and knowable, without ceasing to be God because we’ve somehow got Him all figured out. [Pages 36-37]

Is uncertainty the same as humility?

For all the talk of perspectives and uncertainty, McLaren still believes that some interpretations are good and some are bad. He has to. We all have to, if we are to have anything to say. No one writes books or preaches sermons or gives talks or converses in a dialogue unless he believes that what he is saying is true, or at least truer than other options out there. What is frustrating, then, is when emerging authors claim to postmodern moral high ground that supposedly eschews reason, logic, and certain truth claims.

On a related note, I’m not sure if it is rhetoric, intellectual laziness, humility, fear of criticism, consistent postmodernism, or all of the above, but much emergent writing is laden with disclaimers. McLaren’s writings provide many examples. Here’s one from an article about homosexuality: “I am no doubt wrong on many things. I am very likely

wrong in my personal opinions on homosexuality (which, by the way, were never expressed in the piece, contrary to the assumptions of many responders).

[http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o_3.html] It may be a sign of humility to admit that your opinions are fallible, but admitting that your opinions on a particular subject are very likely wrong is odd to say the least. Why hold to your personal opinions if you think they are wrong? [Page 42]

3. The Danger of Ambiguity: Homosexuality as a Test Case

New Testament scholar Witherington believes Rob Bell has also been evasive (at best) when asked about homosexuality. [“Rob Bell Hits Lexington and a Packed-Out House,” February 15, 2007, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>] Witherington is largely positive toward Bell, but critical when it comes to his ethics. Without coming out and affirming homosexual behavior, Bell, speaking to a packed-out auditorium on his Sex God book tour, made all the usual arguments for acceptance of homosexuality. The arguments went something like this (with Witherington’s response summarized in parentheses): We shouldn’t speak on this issue unless we have gay friends (but didn’t Paul speak to the issue?). Jesus never said anything about homosexuality (but didn’t Jesus talk about God’s design for marriage and celibacy for single persons?). We are hypocritical to ignore heterosexual sin (agreed, so let’s stop ignoring it). The Bible says nothing about orientation (but it forbids homosexual behavior regardless). [Page 46]

The danger of ambiguity: Homosexuality as a test case

When you are faced with one of the most explosive and controversial subjects facing any church and any pastor, it is good wisdom to search for questions behind the questions, but it is also prudent, helpful, and pastoral to tell your people what you actually think about the issue.

I don’t doubt that there are many people like the couple in McLaren’s article who ask about homosexuality because they have a family member who is gay and they want to know if he or she would be harshly condemned in their church. But McLaren and other emerging church leaders surely must realize that indecision is not pastorally helpful to most people. There are people in my congregation who struggle with same-gender attraction. To ostracize them for struggling with these desires would be pastorally damaging, but so would an unwillingness to encourage them in their fight against these desires.

I know a man whose mother left home and went to live with her lesbian partner. He used to go to the Methodist church, but stopped going to that church and church altogether after the pastor told him to stop being so judgmental about his mother. He figures, “I don’t need a church to take the side of my lesbian mother and tell me to get over it.” Another couple at our church is still dealing with the hurt from a previous

marriage where the former husband ran off with a priest. I recently spoke with a man in our church who wants help overcoming same-gender attraction issues.

Such stories don't tell the whole story, of course. But they do remind us of what the emerging church often forgets, that some people need to know with certainty what we think about homosexuality.

I'm not impressed with the emergent claim to be a sanctified middle ground between conservative dogmatists and liberal bad guys. The emergent tendency to wind up as the fresh and sane third option between two caricatures is unfair. I trust that McLaren and others realize that it's not just fire-breathing conservatives who know what emergent leaders should think about homosexuality. It's also Peter Akinola, pimate of Nigeria, and Archbishop Livingston Mpalanyi Nkoyoyo of Uganda who sacrificed financial aid from the West rather than be implicated in the Episcopal church's homosexual scandals, and the rest of the global South who know exactly what emerging leaders should think about homosexuality, not to mention nearly two thousand years of Christians who were also certain about God's opinion on the subject. [It's no secret that the global South, especially African leaders in the Anglican church, have responded in dismay over the confirmation of Gene Robinson by the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA is the Anglican branch in America) as the first actively gay bishop. For example, Akinola concluded his statement: "A clear choice has been made for a church that exists primarily in allegiance to the unbiblical departures and waywardness of our generation, a Church that enthrones the will of men over and above the authority of God and His revealed and written Word. Such a church is bound to become a shrine for the worship of men rather than God" (<http://www.ekk.org/articles.php?id=12&page=8>).

Nkoyoyo's words were even stronger. When the ECUSA wanted to send a delegation to Uganda in order to offer financial assistance to the people, the Archbishop explained why he could not accept such a delegation. "If we fall silent about what you have done – promoting unbiblical sexual immorality – and we overturn or ignore the decision to declare a severing of relationship with ECUSA, poor displaced persons will receive aid. Here is our response: The gospel of Jesus Christ is not for sale, even among the poorest of us who have no money. Eternal life, obedience to Jesus Christ, and conforming to his Word are more important. The Word of God is clear that you have chosen a course of separation that leads to spiritual destruction. Because we love you, we cannot let that go unanswered... As a result, any delegation you send cannot be welcomed, received, or seated. Neither can we share fellowship nor even receive desperately needed resources. If, however, you repent and return to the Lord, it would be an occasion of great joy."] Martyn Lloyd-Jones, writing in a different context, could have been speaking about the emerging church when he said, "First, these people generally object to clear-cut definitions; they dislike clarity and certainty. We need not at this point go into the specific reason for this. I think they object to clarity of thought and definition because of its demands. The most comfortable type of religion is always a

vague religion, nebulous and uncertain, cluttered with forms and rituals. [D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 44.]

To all the pastors reading this book who will encounter questions about homosexuality, please be sensitive and ask good questions, but do not be silent and do not be uncertain. [Pages 47-49]

4. What about Doubt?

Don't misunderstand; doubt is not the unforgivable sin. All the great books on spiritual warfare (or spiritual direction or spiritual formation, as they might go through the seasons of doubt. They question their faith. They don't sense God's presence. They doubt their salvation. Most of us will feel these things at some point in our lives, which is why Jude says, "Have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22).

But if we are to show mercy to those who doubt, doesn't this suggest that doubt is something we are supposed to work through and fight against rather than embrace as the great friend of faith? Faith is, after all, being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrew 11:1). True faith, to quote the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/A 21), "is not only a knowledge and conviction; it is also a "deep-rooted assurance." To be sure, Jesus had mercy on those who struggled. Sometimes the only prayer we can muster is "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). But Jesus also rebuked those who doubted and chided His disciples for having little faith (Matt. 6:30; 21:21; John 20:27; cf. James 1:6).

Tomlinson would have us break free from our "rigid frameworks of certainty" and "climb out of the little boat of our settled certainties and join Jesus in walking on the waters of uncertainty and vulnerability." But let's look at that story for a moment. Peter took a risk when he came to Jesus on the water. Way to go, Peter. That took faith – we have all heard sermons how you can't walk on water until you get out of the boat. But Peter saw the wind and was afraid. He doubted. And what was Jesus' response? "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31). Doubt was not the friend of Peter's faith but it's enemy. Jesus did not applaud Peter for his struggle to believe, but rebuked him for his doubt and lack of faith, for his uncertainty.

Perhaps in some churches, people need room to question without fear of disapproval. Perhaps some Christians need permission to think again. But being tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine is not the goal. Perhaps some of us on the journey need to be reminded of the destination, that we are moving toward a place where faith will become sight.

And until we reach that destination, let us rest confidently in the certain truth that God is knowable and can make Himself and His ways known. Maybe Lloyd-Jones – in his

typical Welsh, Calvinist, authoritarian, overstated way – was on to something. “Come to Word of God,” He says. “Stop asking questions. Start with the promises in their right order. Say: ‘I want the truth whatever it costs me.’ Bind yourself to it, submit yourself to it, come in utter submission as a little child and plead with Him to give you a clear sign, perfect vision, and to make you whole.... We are not meant to be left in a state of doubt and misgiving, of uncertainty and unhappiness.” [Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 48.] [Pages 50-51]

CHAPTER 3. Bible: Why I love the person and propositions of Jesus

5. Text messaging

Does doctrine speak of what is objectively true and corresponds to reality, or does it merely set the rules of discourse and explain our belief mosaic? Grenz and Franke are trying to answer the question, “How do we know what we know about God?” The old answer, which they find hopelessly modern, is, “We know because it’s in the Bible, which is God’s self-revelation in divinely inspired words.” The new postmodern answer, it seems to me, is less certain and less absolute. The postmodern answer is, “We know that what we know about God because it is the expression of our community’s understanding of the biblical message that the Spirit is speaking through the Bible in our called-out community.” We end up with functional authority for the Bible that is dependent upon the community rather than intrinsic authority that is based on God having spoken.

At first blush, it sounds like a mark of piety to make the Spirit speaking through the Word (and creation and each other and other venues perhaps) the authority rather than the text of Scripture. It always scores a rhetorical victory to accuse evangelicals of bibliolatry, of worshiping the Bible rather than the Christ of the Bible, but it almost always misses the point. Every Christian I know who believes the Bible is the Word of God worships the Christ he finds in the Bible, believes in this Christ, and prays to this Christ. These Christians also happen to believe that God not only speaks to them through the Bible, but that God’s words are recorded in the text of Scripture. Isn’t this what Paul meant when he called the Scriptures “the oracles of God” and breathed-out by God (Rom. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16)? Isn’t this what Hebrews means when it quotes from the Old Testament, saying, “Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 3:7)? Didn’t Peter hold to a verbal, plenary view of inspiration when he asserted that no prophecy of Scripture came from the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21)? Didn’t Jesus assume intrinsic authority in the actual texts of Scripture when He quoted Deuteronomy to the Devil in the wilderness with the words “it is written” (Matt. 4:1-11)? Wasn’t Jesus trusting that the words of Scripture were the very words of God when He quoted Genesis 2:24 and assumed that words of the text were the words of the Creator (Matt. 19:4-5)? [Pages 80-81]

6. A Firm Foundation?

Not only do many emergent leaders reject the Bible as the foundation of Christian theology and reflection, they are also skeptical of our ability to understand the original intent of the biblical authors. Since words are only symbols, the truth in the Bible must be seen as ambiguous and in need of constant reinterpretation. [Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 115.] The Bible is open-ended. All we can do is tell people what we think the Bible means – give them our version. [Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 46, 55.] Somebody has to decide which Bible verses apply and which don't. [Ibid., 58.] “The real authority does not reside in the text itself, in the ink on paper, which is always open to misinterpretation – sometimes, history tells us, horrific and dangerous misinterpretation. Instead, the real authority lies in God, who is there behind the text or beyond it or about it, right? In other words, the authority is not in what I say the text says but in what God says the text says.” [McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 50.] All we have are interpretations. [According to Bell, nobody really gives you the Bible straight. They just tell you what they think it means (54). At times, Bell seems to be simply advocating some interpretative humility. At other times he makes the whole process of discerning biblical truth sound willy-nilly and downright impossible. “Somebody in your history decided certain Bible verses still apply and others don't” (56). Scripture alone sounds nice, “but it is not true” (67). Bell's reason for rejecting sola scriptura? The fact that “we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is...” In one sentence Bell brushes aside centuries of the Protestant understanding of the canon – the church did not vote on the books of the Bible, but it recognized the authority these books already possessed in the churches by virtue of apostolic authorship or connection.] [Page 82]

7. Finding the Right and Wrong Meanings

Unless we are God, we must always hold out the possibility that we have understood something incorrectly. Christians have misread the Bible before, and we'll do it again, I'm afraid. But that doesn't mean we can't hold on with firmness to biblical truth, nor even that we can't consider some matters of interpretation settled. The biblical authors were humans who grew and changed and learned, and yet they didn't hesitate to write about what they knew and were convinced of.

Emergent authors are really no different. They still write books. They still use language to communicate ideas and trust implicitly that the people reading their books and blogs will understand what they mean to say. McLaren has uncovered “the secret message of Jesus,” and Chalke has found “the lost message of Jesus,” so these guys must be figuring something out from the Bible. When McLaren wants to make a point about creation, he argues that we need to read the story as a Jew, not a Greek – that's the right way to read the text. [Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 52.] When Bell reads “I am the way, the truth, and the

life,” he knows that Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than others; He was just showing the best possible way for a person to live. [Bell, Velvet Elvis, 21.] So there are still right and wrong meanings from the text. It seems that when emergent authors want to contest traditional beliefs (in, say, hell, exclusivism, and propitiation) they cry, “All we have are interpretations,” but when they want to make their points (say, about hell as a metaphor, inclusivism, and kingdom living) they argue, “You’ve been misreading the Bible, can’t you see?” It seems there is a meaning in the text after all. [Page 84]

8. Truth in Meaningful Words

The heart of the matter is this: Does the God who created us also know how to speak to us? Is He able to communicate truth to us through words in a way that is meaningful and understandable? The answer assumed on every page of Scripture is “yes.” God spoke to patriarchs, prophets, and priests, and when the words God spoke were written down, the people treated those words as the sacred oracles of God. When the people were taught the meaning in those inspired texts (and they obeyed), there was rejoicing (Neh. 8:1-12). When no one instructed them from those words, the people suffered (2 Chron. 15:3). At one point this written revelation was called the Law, then the Law and the Prophets; then the Gospels were added, and then the Epistles, until we finally have what we call the Bible.

At each of those stages what was written was considered by God’s people to be authoritative and demanding of our obedience, because the words written down came from the very mouth of God.

Isn’t it strange, C.S. Lewis wondered, that the Law would be the Psalmist’s delight (Ps. 1:2)? Respect or reverence we might understand, but delight? Who delights in law? And why? Lewis explains: “Their delight in the Law, is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian’s delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.” [C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961), 55.]

In our world of perpetual squishitude, why offer people more of what they already have – vague spirituality, uncertainty, and borderline interpretative relativism? Why not offer them something hard and old like the Law in which we delight, and dare to say and believe “Thus saith the Lord”? [Pages 84-85]

Notes:

As D.A. Carson has pointed out, emerging church leaders, unlike the Reformers, are calling for change because the culture has moved. The Reformers, by contrast, were calling for change because the church had moved away from the Bible. “Reformed and always reforming” was not a motto giving license for continual doctrinal innovation,

which is how I've heard *simper reformada* used a hundred times. It was a rallying cry to keep going back to the Scriptures so that by them the church may be reformed and always reforming. [Page 86]

CHAPTER 4. Thank you for smoking: On dialogue, futurism, and hell

9. Driving Mr. D.A. Isy

"I don't blog," he says. I can tell saying "blog" is uncomfortable for him. Like when your dad tries to sing lyrics from one of your favorite songs. "What would I have to give up for two hours each day if I started posting responses to these guys on their Web sites?" he asks.

I briefly imagine what D.A. Carson's Web site might look like if he had one. Would it include the obligatory artsy-hip-pensive-scholarly black-and-white photos? Perhaps one of Carson with his glasses off, pondering a point. Would he describe himself as a "thinker, rebel, revolutionary, speaker, writer, scholar" like some of his emergent contemporaries?

"I'm very easy to get ahold of," he continues. "After my book on the emergent church came out, I got a blistering twenty-page response from an emergent leader via e-mail....He was very angry. Stuff to the effect that I was trying to ruin him and ruin his ministry. So I replied, point by point, with my own twenty-pager, and at the end said I'd be delighted to meet him to work out some of these differences in person."

Well?

"He wrote me back a very short e-mail and said that he had nothing more to discuss."
[Pages 92-39]

10. On Tolerance

Voltaire, says Carson during the session, also gave us a working definition of tolerance when he said, "I may disagree with everything you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

However, tolerance today, in Carson's estimation, is more of an outright refusal to say that anyone else is wrong. It is a core value of the emergent non-movement.

"Leonard Sweet recently wrote on his Web site that he would rather be wrong with Brian McLaren than right with D.A. Carson," says Carson. I expect a scathing word to follow, but there is none. Carson just leaves the comment to hang in the air and speak for itself.

“Postmodernism turns to the ‘I,’” he says, “where premodernism commonly began with God.” [Page 94]

CHAPTER 5. *Doctrine: The drama is in the dogma*

11. **Just Give Me Jesus**

But is it really the traditional faiths that are having a hard time of things in our postmodern world? Of course, we want to be careful “proving” church theology by growth and size, but it is worth pointing out what is now common knowledge; namely, that conservative churches are growing in America, and liberal churches – those committed to nondogmatic specificity – are not. Over the past decade among liberal churches, declines in attendance have ranged from 5.3 percent to as much as 14.8 percent. By comparison, conservative denominations have been growing over the past ten years, ranging from 5 percent (the Southern Baptist Convention) to more than 50 percent (57.2 percent in the Evangelical Free Church). [Statistics are from Dave Shiflett, *Exodus: Why Americans Are Fleeing Liberal Churches for Conservative Christianity* (New York: Sentinel, 2005), xiii-xiv. Shiflett reported double-digit growth for the Assemblies of God (18.5 percent), Conservative Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (18.6 percent), the Christian and Missionary Alliance (21.8 percent), The Church of God (40.2 percent), and the Presbyterian Church in America (42.4 percent). In their book *The Churching of America, 1776-2005* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), Roger Finke and Rodney Stark come to the opposite conclusion of Taylor and denominations rejected traditional doctrines and ceased to make serious demands on their followers, they ceased to prosper. The churching of America was accomplished by aggressive churches committed to vivid otherworldliness” (xiv).]

The mainline church bent over backward to accommodate modernism, and its members have budget crunches and shrinking churches to show for it. Will the emerging church go down the same nondoctrinal path as the mainline church relative to postmodernism? If it is really true that wherever you are finding “passion and love and exhilaration” there “you are finding God,” [Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 92.] Christianity has no unique message to give the world.

I have no doubt that non-Christians find some of the emergent literature very appealing. The literature often describes who they already are – non-dogmatic, ambiguously spiritual postmoderns interested in making the world a better place. But where is there mention of the hard edges of Christian faith – God’s holiness, divine judgment, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, human depravity, the necessity of new birth? [Page 107]

12. Orthodoxy as a Way of Life

Besides being untrue, orthodoxy as orthopraxy is monumentally unhelpful. It sounds wonderful at first. Jesus is the best way to live. Where's the harm in that? After all, it is true that Jesus taught good ethics and set a good moral example. But if orthodoxy means I live the right way, the way of Jesus, I have no hope. Where do I turn after I've screwed up the beatitudes for the fiftieth time? Where do I find peace when I realize I fail the Sermon on the Mount daily? What do I tell the Devil when he reminds me that I don't do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God (see Mic. 6:8) as I should?

And what about my family and friends? What comfort do I give a loved one who is dying with cancer and feels no assurance of salvation because she hasn't loved God or her neighbor enough? I hope I can read Ephesians 2 and tell her that though she was dead in her trespasses and sins, by nature an object of wrath, now she has been made alive together with Christ and that by grace alone her sins have been forgiven, not according to works lest anyone should boast.

Now, I'm sure that many in the emergent church would also talk about, but I don't read much about grace in their books. Certainly, there's grace as a general inclusiveness, but not grace as the only hope for sinners deserving of God's judgment. I despair when I hear Pagitt say, "The good news is not informational....Instead we have an invitation into a way of life – life we constantly realize is not ours alone." [Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 103.] If the good news is an invitation to a Jesus way of life and not information about somebody who accomplished something on my behalf, I'm sunk. This is law and no gospel. [Pages 113-114]

13. Repainting Our Theology

This liberal (in the strict theological sense of the word) way of thinking has been labeled by Robert Sanders "the ecstatic heresy." The term ecstatic comes from Pual Tillich. The perspective claims that God can only be known in feeling, in ways that transcend human language, so that God can never be the object of observation and described like you would describe an electron, a tree, or a cat. To do so would be to profane God. [Robert Sanders, "The Ecstatic Heresy," *Christianity Today*, October 2004, 55.] Sanders is an Episcopalian who sees the ecstatic heresy underlying many of the divisions in the mainline Protestant churches. His analysis is worth reading and can apply to the emergent church as well.

Ecstatic: God in himself, or in his revelation as Word and words, is never really verbal. He always transcends language.

Orthodox: God is transcendent in his essence, but God can speak to human beings who can actually understand him. Above all, God is known in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh...

Ecstatic: The task of theology is to reinterpret the faith as relevant to new cultural contexts. The context of faith evolves since culture evolves.

Orthodox: The task of theology is first and foremost to clarify and preserve the faith once delivered to the saints and to transfer intact to each succeeding generations. Certain aspects of revelation never evolve...

Ecstatic: Doctrines do not literally refer to God but to feeling, the depth of reality, or the horizon of being. Therefore doctrines can be radically reinterpreted in terms of ecstatic categories, and pastoral experience can carry more weight than doctrine.

Orthodox: Doctrines teach truths about God – his moral will and his saving acts. They can be variously understood. They deal with mysteries, but they cannot be reinterpreted in categories that have no literal reference to a God who speaks. [Ibid., 56-57]

14. Building Bridges and Building Walls

When people find out I'm writing on the emerging church, they often ask me, "Where is this going to end up?" I'm neither the prophet nor the son of a prophet, so I can't say. I doubt it will drop off the radar screen, though I could be mistaken. I hope the movement corrects itself, because there are voices within the conversation that are theologically orthodox and truly want to reform the evangelical church from some of its reductionistic, seeker-driven, arrogant, tradition-shunning errors. My fear, however, is that the movement will pick up steam and chug along in an increasingly biblically ill-formed, doctrine-less direction. There are lots of good intentions and plenty of whimsically stated paradoxes, but is there a message with doctrinal content that forms the center of the movement? As Lionel Trilling rightly warns, "When the dogmatic principle in religion is slighted, religion goes along for a while on generalized emotion and ethical intention...and then loses the force of its impulse, even the essence of its being. [Lionel Trilling as quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, "How We Got to Where We Are," *First Things*, January 2007, 172.]

Young people will give their lives for an exclamation point, but they will not give their lives for a question mark, not for very long anyway. Once the protest runs out and the emerging church has its own blogdom, and conferences, and church networks, and book deals, there will be no exclamation point, and all that's left will be ethical intentions and passionate appeals for kingdom living. This will not sustain a movement—the protest will for a while, but once that's gone there will be no great vision of God, no urgent proclamation of salvation, no eternal judgment or reward at stake, just a call to live rightly and love one another. That message will sell on Oprah,

Larry King, and at the Oscars, but it won't sustain and propel a gospel-driven church, because it isn't the gospel. Art, community, creativity, the environment, and a living wage are all nice things to be "for," just like family values, patriotism, school vouchers, faith-based initiatives, and a strong military, but isn't the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be mainly about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the death and resurrection of Jesus, His atonement for our sins, the promise of eternal life, and the threat of coming judgment? In the rush to welcome people in we mustn't forget what "in" means. [Pages 127-128]

CHAPTER 6. A funeral for a friend: On churches, story, and propositional language

15. More Man-centered than God-centered

That said, based on a lot of the reading I've done on Emergent—stuff like McLaren's books, Erwin McManus, Pete Rollins, Rob Bell, etc., I don't think Emergent is the answer. What I'm feeling more and more is that Emergent is just a new set of conceits—a love of philosophy, leftist politics, and a theology that is more man-centered than God-centered. To the Emergent, Christianity is a story from which ethics are gleaned, rather than a life-saving proposition. That's my take on it at least...although I'm still doing lots of reading. Check out D.A. Carson's "Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church." [Ted Kluck] [Page 141]

16. Christianity and the Arts

Sufjan is here to perform this weekend, as well as "engage in an ongoing discussion of Christianity and the arts"—a discussion that has been going for at least ten years now, since I left a Christian college a lot like this one, filled with well-to-do artsy Christian kids trying to "out-dishevel" one another at gatherings like this one. The conference is called FFM, or the Festival of Faith and Music. Its official purpose, I'm told, is to "explore what is worthwhile in today's popular music scene."

The event's emcee is a faculty member at Calvin, who explains that the conference, in essence, is "a profound apology from the Christian community for doing such a poor job of engaging art and culture in the public square." He adds, "We don't have a lot of answers."

This is an apology I've heard made several times before, and I'm still a little unclear as to the reason. Is it because churches aren't displaying art on their walls? Neither are insurance companies, but nobody is up in arms about that. My hunch is that there is this feeling that churches aren't adequately "supporting" artists (musicians, writers, visual artists) in their midst. However, I don't exactly see churches "supporting" software designers, salesmen, or farmers either. That's not the church's purpose. And it seems that the artists who are making the most noise about "not being supported"

are the ones who may not have the talent to really cut it in the marketplace anyway. I don't know of any working artists (musicians, actors, writers, painters) who complain that their church doesn't "support" their efforts. Art is tough. Making a living at art is tough. It's tough on families and marriages. That's simply the nature of the game. [Page 143]

CHAPTER 7. Modernism: The boogeyman cometh

16. The Monster of Modernism

...the emerging church view of history is still naïve. Are creedal statements really the product of modern spirituality? Whenever this new spirituality supposedly started—whether the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, or 1900s—statements of faith certainly predate modernism. What about Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, and Ephesus, not to mention Trent, Augsburg, and Dort—all of which predate 1620? Does anyone really believe that creedal formulations began with modernism, as if Christians suddenly got obsessed with doctrine in the wake of the Enlightenment?

Perhaps now is an appropriate time to put in a good word for systematic theology. Are systematic theologies really the product of modern Christianity's quest for a perfect belief system? Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin may not have been systematicians like Louis Berkhof or Wayne Grudem, but weren't they just as passionate about the right "belief system"? Weren't they writing about theology in an organized, systematic way hundreds of years before modernism? Hasn't every pastor, emergent or otherwise, preached a topical sermon or led a Bible study on a particular area of inquiry? Like, who is God? Or what about evil? Or what did Jesus accomplish? This is systematic theology—taking a question and trying to hear what all of Scripture says about it. Isn't that what McLaren has done about the kingdom or Dan Kimball about worship? [Page 151]

17. Addresses Areas They Believe Crucial

I understand that the emerging church is only addressing certain areas of inquiry that they deem are most crucial. That's their prerogative. But at some point in the conversation it would be nice if they would share their convictions on something other than community, kingdom living, and mystery. The emerging church will grow irrelevant to the very culture it is trying to reach if it can't answer with some measure of clarity, however tentatively, the most basic questions that face every human being. [Page 151]

18. Reimagining Christianity Not Necessary

So if things below the surface are not that different and human need is still the same (and truth is still the same, I might add), why must Christianity “change or die”? I’m not some old fuddy-duddy pining for the good old days. I’m not opposed to new styles or new approaches, but if we are not really facing anything new on the most fundamental spiritual level, perhaps a fundamental reimagining of our Christian faith is not necessary. [Page 153]

19. Interpersonal Communication

I may be already hopelessly out of touch with the culture at my young age, but aren’t some of the new names going to be obstacles to the faith more than invitations? Beside being confusing, won’t many seekers find that we are trying a bit too hard when we have fusion services instead of worship and hire experience designers instead of pastors and call ourselves an “incubator for kingdom-inspired community-building, creativity, and social action [This is the name of the community Dieter Zander, formerly of Willow Creek, helped found in San Francisco.] instead of a church? At what point can we say that “sitting barefooted on the floor” and commenting on Ephesians as “an impromptu but extended tête-à-tête between church members and leadership” that focuses on “the intensity of interpersonal communication” [Description is from Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 176.] sounds more profound than it really is? There’s nothing offensive about this tête-à-tête, but isn’t it just sitting on the ground talking about the Bible? [Pages 154-155]

20. “Dialogue the Word, Timothy!”

I am emphasizing this point about discursive preaching because I believe many emergent Christians, not to mention many evangelicals, are rejecting a kind of preaching and worship that they believe to be modern, but which is, in fact, anything but. And in so doing, they are pitting information against transformation and experiential worship against a “renewing of the mind,” when the Bible never means to separate these things. The book of Proverbs is all about growing in knowledge and insight so on can live a godly life. The prophets are constantly using discourse, monologue even, to affect the wills of their hearers. Ezra and the Levites instructed the returned exiles by reading the Law and “giving them the sense of it” (Neh. 8:6-8). Israel suffered when she lacked a teaching priest (2 Chron. 15:3). And from the earliest days, the Levites were given to “teach Jacob your rules, and Israel your law” (Deut. 33:10). God’s people have always been built up by the teaching of the Scriptures, and good Christian worship has always centered on a clear, authoritative, expositional preaching of the Word of God. [Cf. Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 158: “If anybody understands multiple meanings within the same thing, it is God. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the best preaching, as

poetic and elegant as it can become, cannot afford to drift too far into meaning many things at once. As important to the human soul as the Psalms and the poetic utterances of the prophets are, the preaching that issues out of them should lead back in the firmness and direct applicability of propositional truth.” Best is an organist and composer and former dean of the conservatory of Music at Wheaton College.]

Much of the emergent disdain for preaching is really an uneasiness about authority and control. Discussion, yes. Dialogue, yes. Group discernment, yes. Heraldry? Proclamation? Not on this side of modernism. But is it really modernism we are rejecting or something weightier? The decline in preaching goes hand in hand with a lost confidence in the importance of truth claims. Preaching presupposes there is a message that must be proclaimed and believed. The very act of verbal proclamation by one man to God’s people assumes that there is a word from God that can be ascertained, understood, and meaningfully communicated. This is what is being objected to in preaching, not simply the specter of modernism.

I find it disconcerting that Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz is supposed to be the new model for leadership. “Rather than being a person with all the answers, who is constantly informed of what’s up and what’s what and where to go, she is herself lost, a seeker, vulnerable, often bewildered,” writes McLaren. “These characteristics would disqualify her from modern leadership. But they serve as her best credentials for leadership in the emerging culture.” [McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 158ff] In the emerging church, pastors should move from broadcaster to listener. From warrior-salesman to dancer. From problem solver to quest inspirer. From knower to seeker. [Ibid., 160ff.]

No doubt, there are times when the pastor is facilitator and fellow seeker. But there are also times—every Sunday, in fact—when he must be a herald. And as he ministers among God’s people, he should be able to say, by the grace of God, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). It sounds humble when Pagitt says he doesn’t want to be his people’s pace car. [Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 79.] But aren’t overseers supposed to be approach (Titus 1:6), able to instruct in sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it (1:9), and in all respects a model of good works (2:7)?

Is the best corrective domineering CEO pastors really bewildered Dorothy leaders? How about shepherd or teacher or overseer or herald? Pastors are supposed to be more than lost travelers with more questions than answers. They are supposed to fan into flames the gift of preaching (2 Tim. 1:6), be filled with power instead of timidity (1:7), and rebuke, reprove, and exhort with complete patience and teaching (4:2). [Pages 158-160]

21. Is Emergent the New Modern?

The biggest irony about the emergent church may be just this: For all their chastisement of all things modern, they are in most way thoroughly modern. Many of the leading books display a familiar combination of social gospel liberalism, a neo-orthodox view of view of Scripture, and a post-Enlightenment disdain for hell, the wrath of God, propositional revelation, propitiation, and anything more than a vague moralistic, warmhearted, a doctrinal Christianity. [Page 160]

22. The Emergent Need to Study Church History?

Doug Pagitt is also guilty of some historical parallelomania. Like Bell, Pagitt needs to do more to support his speculations. If he is going to suggest that Pelagius came to his understanding of human ability because it fit with the Druids, and Augustine came to his position of human inability because it fit with Roman spirituality, [Pagitt, *Listening to the Beliefs*, 128-29] he needs to do some more work to demonstrate this is so, especially when (1) Pelagius studied Greek theology, not Druid runes; (2) the controversy broke out in Rome and later in Palestine, not in the British Isles; and (3) the writings from Pelagius and Augustine show both arguing mainly over Scripture texts.

Simply put, emergent leaders need some restraint so as to avoid dashing off slipshod summaries of church history, like the one on John Calvin in McLaren's *Generous Orthodoxy*. [The following examples come from McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 210 ff.] Calvin did not become a pastor at age eighteen. he received a benefice—a minor office in the church working for the Bishop—at age twelve and broke off studying for the priesthood and began studying law at age eighteen. Calvin did not work on the Institutes between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five (most scholars believe he wasn't even converted until he was in his twenties). He worked on it while Basel, January through August of 1535, writing six chapters for the 1536 edition of the Institutes that would swell to eighty chapters by 1559. And more importantly, Calvin did not write the Institutes to fill the “dangerous vacuum” left after the rejection of Catholicism with “a lean and pure intellectual system.” Calvin never saw himself as instituting an intellectual system or even a systematic theology.

He wrote the Institutes for two reasons: (1) as a defense before the king of France that the Protestant church was the legitimate church and should be treated fairly, and (2) as an elementary instructional tool for new or struggling Christians. Calvin labored for his own Frenchmen, “for I saw that many were hungering and thirsting after Christ and yet the only very few had even the slightest knowledge of him.” [This line comes from the opening paragraph of the 1536 *Institutes*, as quoted in T.H.L] If some in the emergent church don't like Calvin or Reformed theology, fair enough. But they should

know what they are rejecting and avoid ill-informed historical reconstructions. The emergent church simply needs to do its historical homework. [Pages 164-165]

CHAPTER 8. Where everybody knows your name: Dialoguing for the sake of dialogue

23. McLaren's Non-stance on Homosexuality, in the same article, is just as ambiguous:

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 so that we can say "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us."...

Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection. After all, many important issues in church history took centuries to figure out. ["Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question," in "Out of Ur," a Leadership Journal blog, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren-o.html]

I find it hard to believe that McLaren has trouble figuring out what to believe on an issue that seems, to my admittedly un-seminary-trained eye, to be so cut and dried in Scripture. As cut and dried as adultery, theft, murder, covetousness, and a litany of other sins that even emergents can agree upon, with a minimum of dialogue. I also have to believe that we can lovingly take stands on these issues. I have a homosexual friend [I know, I know, the "I have a gay friend" thing is the classic bigot's defense, but what can you do? I'll probably get ripped for this paragraph either way.] that I'm certain knows my faith, and also knows how I feel about his lifestyle, but that doesn't stop us from having lunch, talking about our careers, and generally getting along. I'm thankful that just because I'm a Christian he doesn't lump me in with the "bad-comb-over, polyester suit, Southern-accent" crowd that has probably made him feel terrible at some point in his life. But for me to pretend that I'm "taking a few years to determine my position" on his lifestyle would perhaps be the most awkward, patronizing thing I could possibly do.

Sometimes, offer a clear proposition, not a muddy, indefinite "dialogue," is the loving thing to do.

CHAPTER 9. Jesus: Prince of Peace, Bearer of Wrath

24. “Thy Kingdom Come”

What is absent from the emergent understanding of the kingdom is the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). What’s missing is a call to conversion. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” were the first words preached by John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt. 3:2; 4:17), informing us that the kingdom is for the penitent. And the first words of the Sermon on the Mount are “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” alerting us that the Sermon on the Mount can only be lived out in complete reliance on Jesus Christ. [Lloyd-Jones explained in a sermon fifty years ago, “For whom is the Sermon the Mount intended? To whom does it apply? What is really the purpose of this Sermon; what is its relevance? ...The principles, it was said, were there laid down as to how life should be lived by men, and all we have to do is apply the Sermon on the Mount. We can thereby produce the kingdom of God on earth, war will be banished and all our troubles will be ended. That is the typical social gospel view.” He concluded that “these [‘Blessed are’] statements mean that no man can live the Sermon on the Mount in and of himself, and unaided” (Studies in the Sermon on the Mount [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 13-140).] The kingdom manifesto is not a blueprint for ordering the world. It is the way of holiness for those who have repented of their sins, been regenerated, and put their faith in Jesus Christ. [Page 188]

25. Emergent Politics and the Liberating Left

More generally, Christians on the right and left must remember that while Jesus’ message certainly had political implications (most notably, He was Lord and Caesar was not), Jesus never started a political party, nor do we any have record of Him crusading against social and political ills. It’s true that the gospel has social implications. But the social gospel is something else entirely. Rauschenbusch and his followers often equated social action with the gospel so that the kingdom of God was no longer concerned with individual salvation and future life, but with the elimination of intolerance, corruption, injustice, and militarism. [Cf. Darryl Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R, Dee, 2006), 103.] This message is hardly a secret or lost one since the mainline Protestant establishment has been saying it for a hundred years. [For example, the Federal Council Churches, precursor to the National Council of Churches (NCC), issued this statement in 1939 just after World War II broke out: “We call upon the churches now to seek peace, not for safety’s sake or for profit’s sake but for Christ’s sake and a kindlier world. We could not, and would not, be immune from the world’s problems and pain. By generous gift and practical service let us know the fellowship of His suffering in war-torn lands. With willingness to sacrifice let us join with others in preparing the outlines of a just peace, or an economic life undisfigured by poverty and greed, and of a world order in which common needs and service of all nations may find a home” (Secular Faith, 191). Similarly, three decades later, the NCC-backed Consultation on

Church Union (COCU) declared its “struggle against racism, poverty, environment blight, war, and other problems of the family of man” (ibid., 196-97).] The problem is not in working toward the elimination of injustice, though the specific activities lumped under “justice” are often debatable. The problem is in thinking that this is the main business of the church as church. But when the church’s business is mainly political and its unifying creeds are political instead of doctrinal, the church and state overlap until the church becomes redundant. Which is why the Religious Right has been getting such a beating of late, and why people are leaving the politically liberal mainline churches in droves, and why the emerging church will become little more than a venue for left-leaning politics if they continue to view historic Christian doctrine and faith as ancillary to the gospel. [Page 190]

26. Discarding Atonement, Eternal Punishment, Salvation in Christ

Too often well-meaning Republicans and Democrats have been quick to politicize the gospel, unnecessarily alienating their brothers and sisters, and quick to pronounce divinely sanctioned judgments on things they don’t understand. I guess as a gospel minister I tend to focus on, well, the gospel—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I am dogmatic, yet humble, (I hope), about orthodoxy, while I am open-minded, yet opinionated, about politics. That is to say, the difference between emerging churches and what I am aiming for in my church is the difference between unity based on social issues and unity based on theological issues. Orthodoxy means right doctrine that overflows in right living, which can be variously applied in the political sphere. For emerging churches, however, it seems that orthodoxy means right living immediately applied in the political sphere without attention to doctrine.

There are, however, more serious concerns with the emergent view of Jesus than just an overly realized, sometimes overly politicized kingdom message. Many emergent authors are very close to discarding, and some already have, historic understandings of atonement, the existence of eternal punishment, and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in salvation. [Pages 191-192]

27. Man of sorrows

Romans 3:25: God put forward [Christ] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

1 John 4:10: In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The word propitiation means Christ’s death appeased God’s just wrath. It means that Jesus died in our place and took the divinely meted out punishment we deserved. This

is called penal substitution—penal because Christ’s death paid our penalty, and substitution because Christ died in our place. This view of the atonement is not the only way to explain Christ’s suffering and death, but without this view Christ’s death cannot be explained correctly nor in its full glory. Christ was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). That is the heartbeat of the gospel.

It is not the heartbeat of the emergent gospel. [Cf.D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 157-87.] Rather, the cross is a moral example, “showing God’s loving heart, which wants forgiveness, not revenge, for everyone....The cross calls humanity to stop trying to make God’s kingdom happen through coercion and force, which are always self-defeating in the end, and instead, to welcome it through self-sacrifice and vulnerability.” [McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 105-6.] This line of reasoning wouldn’t be so bad, if McLaren didn’t also voice—I don’t see any indication that this isn’t his voice coming through the story—this verdict on substitutionary atonement: “That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know? [Ibid., 102.] Steve Chalke and Allan Mann, in what McLaren calls a “provocative and helpful” book, [McLaren, *Secret Message*, 226.] go even further down this sad road, describing penal substitution as “a form of cosmic child abuse,” which, they write, contradicts the statement “God is love” and “makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.” [Steve Chalke and Allan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 157-87.]

Likening the cross to “cosmic child abuse” is a decidedly ungenerous way of describing penal substitution and a condescending way to talk of the atonement. I can only hope that others in the emergent church do not feel the same way about the suffering of Jesus as Chalke does and, it seems, McLaren does. In light of the tests above, Carson’s warning is appropriate: “I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.” [Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 186.] How else can you describe things when two men describe atonement for our sins as cosmic child abuse?

The apostle Peter had no problem seeing the cross as a model for our suffering and as a payment for sin (1 Peter 2:21-24). I wish the emergent church wouldn’t either. The assertion that the cross is simply where Jesus absorbed our pain, [Chalke and Mann, *The Lost Message*, 181.] when the New Testament says Jesus was made to be sin for us, is biblically incomplete. [Pages 193-194]

28. To Hell with Hell?

But the avoidance of hell is not just a “liberal” problem. Evangelicals in recent decades have soft-peddled the doctrine as well, opting instead for a therapeutic God who

encourages our self-esteem. Likewise, some missiologists argue that the missionary enterprise should no longer be seen as a venture to save people from hell, but only as an effort to bring God's kingdom of justice and shalom to all people.

More recently, emergent church leaders have practiced a studied agnosticism about hell and God's wrath, deliberately avoiding the topic in sermons or writing, because, they say, it's not our business who is there—if anyone is there at all. [McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 124ff. See also Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 146, who writes about heaven and hell, yet describes both places as “full of forgiven people.”] [Page 196]

29. We Need God's Wrath

We need the doctrine of eternal punishment. Time and time again in the New Testament we find that understanding divine justice is essential to our sanctification. Believing in God's judgment actually helps us look more like Jesus. In short, we need the doctrine of the wrath of God.

First, we need God's wrath to keep us honest about evangelism.

Third, we need God's wrath in order to risk our lives for Jesus' sake.

Fourth, we need God's wrath in order to live holy lives.

Fifth, we need God's wrath in order to understand what mercy means.

Sixth, we need God's wrath in order to grasp how wonderful heaven will be.

Seventh, we need the wrath of God in order to be motivated to care for our impoverished brothers and sisters.

Eighth, we need God's wrath in order to be ready for the Lord's return. [Pages 198-200]

30. In What Way is Jesus the Only Way?

This book isn't big enough for me to launch into a detailed discussion about pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism, and I probably wouldn't change anyone's mind in a few pages anyway. But let me at least state my position: I believe the Bible teaches—and historic evangelicalism affirms—that salvation comes but one way: through hearing the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection and putting conscious faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. I believe this is taught in passages like John 14:6, Acts 4:12, and Romans 10:5-17. I believe eternal life is only for those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God sent by the Father (John 5:24; 6:27, 40, 47, 54).

I also believe that Scripture puts humanity, at its most fundamental level, into two opposing categories: sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46), wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:36-43), believers and unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22), the righteousness and the wicked (Mal. 3:18), those marked with the name of the Lamb and those marked with the name of the Beast (Rev. 13:11-14:5). As hard as it can be to admit it, for we all have friends and family who do not worship Jesus, the Bible frequently teaches that some belong to God and some do not. There's an inside and an outside to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14-15).

Emergent leaders know their Bibles well enough to know that Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). No emergent leader I've read would be so bold as to say, "Well, that's just rubbish. Jesus was wrong." But what they mean by "the way" is often very different.

Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions. That completely misses the point, the depth, and the truth. Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality. This kind of life Jesus was living, perfectly and completely in connection and cooperation with God, is the best possible way for a person to live. It is how things are...Perhaps a better question than who's right, is who's living rightly? [Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 21.]

So Jesus is the only way not in that He provides sole access to God the Father such that if we do not know Jesus we do not know God. Rather, Jesus is the only way in that if we do not know Jesus we do not know God. Rather, Jesus is the only way in that He shows the only way to truly live. What makes Christianity unique, Chalk argues, is the call to love those who mistreat us and oppress us. [Chalke and Mann, *Lost Message* 121.] [Pages 200-201]

31. It Is Abraham's Belief in God Which Saves

Too often emergent leaders force us to choose between salvation by following Jesus' example or salvation that doesn't care about good works. But this is another false dilemma. By God's common grace people often show the work of the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15), but Paul makes clear that we don't always do what the law requires, such that good works can never justify us in God's sight (Rom. 3:20). Therefore, Abraham is our example, not because he tried to make the world a better place [Mclaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 67.], but because "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6).

32. Salvation Is Only Through Christ

I'm not sure emergent Christians are sincere in their love for Jesus, but what kind of love is it that makes so little of His glory as the long-awaited Messiah and the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16), the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8), the righteous Judge (2 Tim. 4:8), the conquering King who rules the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:26-27), the great I am (John 8:58), and the Lamb who was slain to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29)? Chesterton is right. "Those who charged the Christians with burning down Rome with firebrands were slanderers; but they were at least far nearer to the nature of Christianity than those among the moderns who tell us that the Christians were a sort of ethical society, being martyred in a languid fashion for telling men they had a duty to their neighbors, and only mildly disliked because they were meek and mild." [G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 182.] The early church was important because it was intolerable, and it was intolerable because it was intolerant. Not socially intolerant or coldhearted or obnoxiously abrasive, but intolerant of any salvation but the cross, any God but theirs, and any Lord but Christ.

CHAPTER 10. Real Topeka people: In search of community

33. Real Topeka people: In search of community

Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; he is doing fine. Peter loses faith in himself. Peter loses faith that he can do what the Rabbi is doing. If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes that you can actually be like him....What I'm learning is that Jesus believes in me....God has faith in me.

So the point of all of this, according to Velvet Elvis, is that God came to earth, to die, to help us realize the great potential inside us. It's no wonder that this is popular. It's the spiritual equivalent of Rocky ascending the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum and then digging deep to knock out Apollo Creed. Even more troubling is Bell's view of the atonement, on page 146, where he teaches that Jesus died for everyone, which reconciles everyone to God. Thus, people must simply choose whether or not they want to live in that "reality."

So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody....This reality isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making.

There is nothing mentioned of those who reject God, and their fate, as laid out in Scripture. [Page 216]

Epilogue. Listening to all the churches of Revelation

34. The King on the Throne

If there is one thing I have tried to do as pastor, it is to lift up apparent opposites that don't need to be opposite. I pray fervently that my church not be a lopsided church that excels in one kind of virtue at the expense of other virtues. Obviously, we won't be able to do all things equally well as a church, by my hope is that we could be marked by grace and truth, logical precision and warmhearted passion, careful thinking and compassionate feeling, strong theology and tender love, Christian liberty and spiritual discipline, congregational care and committed outreach, diversity without doctrinal infidelity, ambition without arrogance, and contentment without complacency.

I believe this is God's vision for the church. And I don't believe anyone in the emerging church is saying anything like this—perhaps in a sentence here or there but not in any balanced way. I fear emergent leaders are creating a host of false dichotomies that will produce lopsided churches, even as they respond to lopsided churches in the opposite directions. [Page 251]

35. Knowing God

One of the things that keeps me grounded as a pastor is to ask myself, “Will this help me and my people die well?” Promoting radical uncertainty does not help people die well. Calling people to live the life of Jesus while minimizing the death of Jesus as the substitutionary sacrifice who turned away our Father's wrath does not help people die well. Calling us to simply experience the wild, unexplainable journey of faith doesn't help much when it comes time to reach our eternal destination.

What puts a rock under our feet and hope in our hearts is the certain knowledge that God is holy, righteous, loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, independent, sovereign, and merciful; that He created the world good only to have Adam plunge the human race into sin and bondage to ever-increasing wickedness; that God purposed in eternity past to save those whom He would call and that in the fullness of time He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to live the life we couldn't and die the death we deserved; that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, justly condemning the unbelieving to eternal punishment and granting the followers of Jesus to live forever in never-ending, always increasing enjoyment of God.

Resting in all of this helps us do what all the mysterious paradoxes and postmodern uncertainties never could—it helps us die well. Call it linear, dogmatic, or hopelessly otherworldly, but it's what Christians have held onto for millennia as their only comfort in life and in death. And by God's grace such an articulation of the Christian message will emerge and reemerge, unapologetically and unhesitatingly, as front and center in

all our churches. It is, after all, as Jude put it so long ago, “our common salvation” and “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” [Pages 252-253]