

A Biblical Critique of the Emerging Church

Introduction

These sessions involve a critique of a movement that you may not know anything about if you are over the age of 40. This movement that I am speaking of is the emergent church.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul warned that the last days of the church would be characterized by apostasy. What I would like to share with you in these sessions is really the next wave of apostasy which is coming and in fact is already here. It is called the emergent church. You may not be familiar with it at all because it is targeted towards the young. All you have to do to validate what I am saying is to go to Google and type in the words "emerging church" or "emergent church," and you will find a plethora of emergent websites, all targeting the young.

Definition

So what is the emergent church? Well, I can't really tell you precisely what it is because the leaders of the movement don't give us a definition. It's kind of like a tub of Jello. It's not like the old days where the theologians would come out and precisely and concisely define their terms and tell you exactly where they stood. The emergent church does not do that. So what we have to do is read the quotations of the emergent church leaders very carefully.

So here is my attempt at a definition. An emerging church is something new arising out of the old, or something new replacing the old. One of the reasons they took this title onto themselves is because they believe they are in a process. Everything is in a process. They are in the process of developing their belief system. One of the things they believe is nobody has the truth. One of their statements is no one has arrived at orthodoxy. So even here at the Chafer Theological Seminary Conference in the year 2013 no one has arrived at orthodoxy. Thus, the emergent church believes that it is in the process of developing its belief system.

Key Leaders

Let me give you a few leaders for the emergent church. Most of these men are younger men. They are very well published. You find their books in virtually any Barnes and Noble or Christian bookstore. They are pastors of fairly large churches around the country. So here are a few names. The top of the list we're going to put Brian McLaren. Beneath him we have Dan Kimball, Leonard Sweet, who I think is a little bit older than the rest of the crowd, Doug Pagitt, and Robert Webber. These men are having a tremendous influence through their writings, and they are having a tremendous influence on the minds of the young.

Paradigm Shift

What the emergent church is ushering in is a paradigm shift, or a re-packaging, or an alteration of Christianity. And here is how they're selling it to the body of Christ. What they're saying is this: the new generation of young people that's coming along, the post moderns or the 20 something's and younger, is so different and so unique that unless Christianity is repackaged and retailored for them, Christianity itself will die. That's the argument that's made. Christianity will not make it to the next generation unless these sweeping changes are introduced that the emergent church leaders want to make.

Here's a few buzzwords that are used to describe this young generation coming along by emergent church theologians. They say this generation is unique, postmodern, it's post Christian, disillusioned, and multi sensory. This younger generation is hungry for a spiritual experience. These are all common buzzwords you'll run into as you read their material. Unless Christianity is re-altered from top to bottom Christianity will die. Christianity will not penetrate that new generation's mind.

Let me give you a few quotes on that if I can. Dan Kimball: "New generations are arising all around us without any Christian influence. So we must rethink virtually everything we are doing in our ministries." [*The Emerging Church*, 13-14] We've got to rethink everything for the sake of this coming generation. "It's time for a Post Modern Reformation, reinvent yourself for the 21st century or die." That's from Leonard Sweet, [*Soul Tsunami*, 17, 75].

One of the reasons I got interested in this subject is because I have at home a six year old. As a father my obvious concern is what kind of Christianity will she grow up within. There's no guarantee that the Christianity that I've grown in will be the Christianity that she will grow up in. There's no guarantee that the type of churches I've been privileged to have as role models will be the type of church that she will have as role models. I'm not interested in this topic not so much for myself. I've already been blessed with the truth. I know the truth. But what kind of church will there be when my daughter comes of age. I believe that if this emergent church mentality is left unchecked, and if we as the body of Christ don't become familiar with it and conversant with it and know how to refute it, then the Christianity that we have today, ten years from now or twenty years from now, will be unrecognizable. That's why I became interested in it and that's why I'm concerned.

Preview

So what I'm going to do with you in these sessions is I'm going to trace what the emergent church thinks in six areas: missions, knowledge, Scripture, church, Christ, and prophecy. All I'm going to do in all of these categories is simply compare what they're saying with the Scripture. I am comparing what they're saying with what I understand to be a traditional interpretation or a traditional understanding of Scripture. I think by the time we finish this session, you'll agree with me that what is being offered is a redefinition of Christianity. So let's learn a little bit about this, not necessarily for ourselves, but let's learn about it for the sake of the kids. Let's learn a little bit about it if we could for the sake of the young.

An Internal Attack

One thing I want to make clear before we get into this. This is something coming up from within. This is not classical liberalism. I'll show you some of these quotes and you'll say well that's just old style liberalism. It is not old style liberalism. We already know what liberals think. Liberals haven't had

anything new to say for the last 50 to 100 years. This is something that is happening within the body of Christ. You can go to any Christian bookstore and find all of these books and all of these quotes present. They very much want the title "evangelical."

Paul warned about this: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves" (that's a very important statement there) "men will rise up speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." [Acts 20:30-31]

This movement, believe it or not, has taken over entire youth groups. There's a number of churches that I've been involved with and I could see that the youth pastor and the youth group have been taken over with all of this literature and all of this material that I'm going to share with you. The older people in the church really didn't have the discernment to recognize something was amiss.

So in many cases what you will find is your children already believe a lot of these things that I'm going to share with you. The older people will say, "well, it's okay because it's sold in the Christian bookstore and it's evangelical." I'm here to argue that what they are arguing or what they are contending for is very different in the belief system you and I hold.

Eight Areas of Redefinition

So let me start with this first category of missions. What I'm going to do is go through six categories. All I'm doing is comparing Scripture with statements.

Missiology

I'm starting with missions first because this is the concept that is being used to promote the emergent church. Their doctrine of missions, what they think about missions, what they think about evangelism is what they are using to promote this movement. And they're arguing that if we don't alter, repackage, and rethink what we're doing, then this gospel that we have won't penetrate the minds of the next generation.

Present Postmodern Generation

The first thing to think about is the present postmodern generation. Everything is tailored towards them. What do the emergent church leaders think about the present postmodern generation? That would be 20 something's and younger.

Dan Kimball, a key leader, says, "Modern thinkers want things very orderly and systematic because they learn in a logical progressive manner. They prefer, generally to sit and listen. Emergent post-Christian generations, on the other hand, long to experience a transcendent God during a worship gathering rather than simply learning about him." [Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 121] Here, experience is being elevated above learning. Dan Kimball goes on, speaking of this younger generation: "They want fluidity and freedom rather than a neatly flowing set program. They want to see the arts and a sense of mystery brought into the worship service rather, than focusing on professionalism and excellence." Notice the last statement there. "This will shape how a worship gathering is designed." [*The Emerging Church*, 121]

So the younger generation is so different that traditional church with its focus on Bible teaching is unappealing to the younger mind. So we have to shift. That's the argument that's being made. Now let's critique this biblically. Is it true that there is a generation coming along that is so different and so unique that everything must be reshuffled from top to bottom to reach that generation. Is that true? I think the answer to that is no because Jesus Himself said in John 12:32, if the Son of man be lifted up, I will draw all men to Myself. What every generation needs (young or old, modern, postmodern, a generation that's had a Christian influence, a generation that's not had a Christian influence) is the clear proclamation of the gospel. There are many verses which describe the gospel's power to penetrate the pagan mind and culture. Isaiah 55:10-11 says that God's Word does not return void, it always accomplishes the purpose for which it is sent. Romans 1:16 tells us that "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation." Notice the word "power" (*dunamis*) in the expression "the power of God unto salvation." 2 Timothy 3:15 tells us that the Scriptures are capable of making us wise unto salvation.

Let me share with you just out of my own personal background on this. I was raised in a very liturgical high church environment. I was an altar boy in the church. They even gave me a great big cross for a perfect Sunday School attendance. And I had the service memorized. We did all the incense. Now I sort of call that the smells and the bells. Up until the age of 16, I was as far away from God as you could possibly get. What changed you? My best friend in high school invited me to a home Bible study which was conducted through another church. The text that was shared that particular evening at the Bible study was John 3:5, which says "lest a man be born of water and the Spirit he can in no wise enter the kingdom of God." When I heard that verse taught I came under strong conviction.

Now why did I come under strong conviction? Because the Holy Spirit uses the God-ordained means, the Word of God or the gospel to bring people to Christ. The gospel is the God-ordained means. The Word of God is the God-ordained means by which He brings the sinner to Christ. It is through the Scripture that we become wise unto salvation. It is through the Scripture that we become aware that we, in fact, are not right with God. When this text was taught I don't even know if the fellow teaching knew I was a Christian or not. When that text was expounded, I came under deep conviction as a 16 year old. Whatever being born of the Spirit meant, I didn't have it. And so it was the Word of God, the preaching of the gospel, that awakened me to my need for Jesus Christ.

I believe this is what every generation needs no matter where they find themselves. Notice the book of Acts. The book of Acts starts in Jerusalem. From there it goes to Antioch, and then after it goes into Antioch it begins to move into pagan territory. It goes into Ephesus, Asia Minor, and bears fruit. It goes to Mars Hill where all of the Greek philosophers gathered and it bore fruit. It goes all the way to Rome and it bore fruit. What the book of Acts is teaching us is "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation." That generally is what every generation needs. They need the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so I don't buy into this idea that there's coming a brand new generation that's so unique, so different, so foreign to anything we've ever seen that Christianity has to be reshuffled. Christianity does not have to be reshuffled. What we have to do is be stewards of the gospel that God has entrusted to us.

Alternate Religions

The emergent takes a very soft view towards alternative religions. As you look at their statement there's a real softening in attitude regarding Islam, Buddhism, and the like. Brian McLaren puts it this way: "I

do not believe making disciples must equal adherence to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts.” [Brian McClaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 260].

A couple of other emergent writers say: “Evangelism or missions for me is no longer persuading people to believe what I believe, no matter how edgy or creative I get. It’s more about shared experiences and encounters. It’s about walking the journey of life and faith together, each distinct to his or her own tradition and culture but with the possibility of encountering God and truth from one another.” [Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 131] So if I’m evangelizing someone that’s of the Islamic persuasion I can encounter a little bit of God from his religion, just like he can encounter a little bit of God from my religion. That’s the mentality of the emergent church.

And there’s a whiff here of a doctrine that we call inclusivism. Inclusivism is a doctrine that has been taught in many corners for a long time. It’s basically the idea that as long as someone is sincere in whatever religion they find themselves (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim) and as long as they are sincere and they have never been exposed to the name Jesus Christ, they will go to heaven. As long as they are sincere and living up to whatever it is their religion requires of them they can go to heaven, not having heard the name Jesus Christ.

So what does the Bible teach? It’s very difficult to find anything in the Bible which has anything really nice to say about an alternative belief system. In fact, I would commend to you 1 Corinthians 10:19-20 where Paul calls a pagan belief system of his day demonically energized.

And what about inclusivism? What about this idea that as long as I’m sincere in what I believe I can be a Buddhist and go to heaven, I can be a Muslim and go to heaven if I’ve never heard the name Jesus Christ? It’s very difficult in Scripture to defend this concept. John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Notice the definite article in front of each of those descriptors. If that weren’t clear enough He says, “no one comes to the Father but by Me.” In Acts 4:12, the Apostle Peter says, “There is no other name.” Notice the emphasis on the word “name.” “There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must” (the word “must” there is very important) be saved.” And 1 Timothy 2:5 says, “There is one mediator,” not two or three. “There is one mediator between God and man.” Then it names the mediator, “the man Christ Jesus.”

Evangelism

What does the emergent church think about evangelism? Well, they don’t really believe in confrontational evangelism. What do I mean by confrontational evangelism? Confronting somebody with the truth claims of Jesus Christ. Dan Kimball says: “He [Jesus] stopped and asked questions of the Samaritan woman,” in John 4. He “didn’t just jump in and say ‘Samaritans are wrong.’” [Dan Kimball, cited in Oakland, *Faith Undone*, 46] Now there’s a little bit of truth to this. Of course, when we evangelize the unsaved we want to be very patient, kind, and as non offensive as possible. At the same time eventually we want to get to the truth claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the very example that Dan Kimball cites in John 4, did that very thing. Although He was patient with the Samaritan woman and very kind to her, eventually he got to the truth. He said, in John 4:21-26 that the Samaritans are wrong and the Jews are right. He said in the very context that salvation is of the Jews. And when He was making that statement He was making a radical statement that the Samaritans are on the wrong side of

the ledger. The Jews, by contrast, were on the right side of the ledger. She began to talk about a coming Messiah that she had an awareness of. In that very chapter Jesus said I am the One whom you speak of.

He made a truth claim. He didn't just converse and dialogue and have a shared experience with her. Although He was patient with her to be sure, eventually he moved to the truth claims of Jesus Christ. And if we're not moving, ultimately, to the truth claims of Christ, in my opinion there's no point in having a conversation. There's so much talk in the emergent church about kindness to the unbeliever. I generally agree with that. We should be kind to the unbeliever. But here's my question: How are we really being kind to an unbeliever if I withhold from them the truth that they need to enter into a right relationship with God. That really is not an act of kindness at the end of the day.

Epistemology

Let me go to a second category and this has to do with the area of knowledge. And I mentioned missions and I mentioned knowledge as the first two categories to discuss because those are the two categories that drive the emergent church. The emergent church is being driven or sold into evangelicalism through its doctrine of missions. It's being sold into evangelicalism through its doctrine of knowledge. And I want to give you a fancy word for knowledge: epistemology.

Epistemology is what drives the emergent church. Epistemology is the area of learning which helps us understand how truth is acquired. How do we acquire truth? How do we know what we know? How can we be certain of what we know? There's a whole branch of philosophy devoted to these types of questions and that is this area called epistemology.

Now here's what's happening with the emergent church. The emergent church has a different epistemology than I have and most likely a different epistemology than you have. Here's basically how it works. What the emergent church is saying is when we read the Bible we are not really reading the Bible. When we read the Bible we are not actually reading the Bible because when we read the Bible we are bringing our own biases to the Bible. When we read texts, we are not reading texts. We are seeing in the text what we think should be in the text rather than what is actually in the text. They're arguing that we are bringing our own biases into Bible interpretation. Therefore, the proper way to acquire knowledge or to develop certainty in the minds of the emergent church is through what's called dialogue.

Dialogue is a word you're going to hear a lot about in the coming years. You're likely hearing about it already. Here's how it works. When I am in dialogue with someone that I disagree with or when I'm in dialogue with a sparring partner, what is happening is I am breaking the biases off the person I am in dialogue with and the person that's dialoging with me is breaking my biases off. Consequently what's happening is we're both losing our biases and so truth does not rest with my debating partner and truth does not rest with me. It rests with common ground between the two of us. The truth is somewhere in the middle. This is a very common epistemology that's rampant in the emergent church and many academics believe this as well. If you're just by yourself reading the Bible you can't really trust what you're reading because all you're doing is reading your own biases back into the Bible. You're filtering the Bible through an *a priori* grid, or an *a priori* lens.

Brian McClaren says, “Isn’t truth often best understood in a conversation, a dialectic (or trialectic)” (that would be three people in the conversation) “or a dynamic tension? Isn’t it subverted by a tendency to ‘soal-ize’?” [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 198] What is happening is this epistemology takes over in the body of Christ and what do we begin to see? We see three things. Number 1, we see endless dialogue. People of different persuasions are constantly in dialogue with one another.

So we have today Reformed theologians (those who reject the idea of the rapture and a coming earthly kingdom) in dialogue with dispensationalists or those like ourselves who believe in a rapture and a coming kingdom. Because neither camp has the truth, the truth is somewhere in the middle. We have even evangelicals and Catholics in dialogue. The Protestants don’t have it right. The Catholics don’t have it right. The truth must be somewhere in the middle because we are all approaching our own religious text with our own biases. Sadly, I’ve seen the combination of Christians and Muslims in dialogue. The key phrase is common ground. There was a conference about two weeks ago at a very well known Bible college. The whole point of the conference was Buddhists and evangelical Christians in dialogue over the subject of worship. In other words, there’s truth about worship that both camps are offering and if we could just get together and dialogue with each other and filter away each other’s biases we could develop common ground. The common ground that is agreed upon becomes the new truth.

So this epistemology is producing endless dialogue. It would be almost as if Jesus said go into all the world and dialogue rather than preach the gospel. Everyone today, to a large extent, is in dialogue with somebody else.

Now there’s a second thing that’s happening. This is what I like to call middle ground mania. Middle ground mania is the idea that the truth is somewhere in the middle, between two opposites. Leonard Sweet says, “The key to navigating postmodernity’s choppy, crazy waters is ... to ride the waves and bridge the opposites, especially where they converge in reconciliation and illumination.” [*Soul Tsunami*, 163] The truth is in the middle.

Brian McClaren’s book is called *A Generous Orthodoxy*. This subtitle of the book says it all. “A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/Protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, incarnational, depressed-yet hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.”

Nobody has the truth. I don’t have the truth, and so I’ve got to be in dialogue with all of these different camps. According to the postmodern emergent church mindset you can believe all of these things, even though the laws of logic would tell you that many of these things contradict each other. Nobody has a direct claim on truth. The truth is in the middle. This is what we call middle ground mania.

The third thing that’s being produced as a result of this new epistemology is uncertainty. There are things in the Bible that previous generations thought were certain that the emergent church is telling us are now uncertain. These are not minor points, by the way. These are critical to Christianity. So Brian McClaren says, “...ask me if Christianity (my version of it, yours, the Pope’s, whoever’s) is orthodox, meaning true, and here’s my honest answer: a little, but not yet.... To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall.” Notice the

last phrase, "... But we keep seeking." [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 293] We haven't yet arrived at truth so we continue to seek.

I found this quote in *Christianity Today*. This is from Kristen Bell who is the wife of Rob Bell who is a very well known emergent church pastor. She said this in *Christianity Today*. "I grew up thinking that we've figured out the Bible... that we know what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means." [*Christianity Today*, 11/1/04] That's very common in the emergent church. It's foreign to our way of thinking but this is how this coming generation of leaders think.

Brian McLaren says, "How do you know that the records we have of Jesus are really what happened? ... I would have to say that I cannot know this with absolute, undoubtable, unquestionable, absolute certainty." [*The Church in the Emerging Culture*, 201] So here he's calling into question even the historical record of Jesus Christ. Let me tell you something, if there is no historical record of Jesus Christ, there is no point in us gathering this morning. Christianity disappears. Our faith is built on the historicity of Jesus Christ. If we cannot trust as certain what we are reading in the gospels then Christianity rapidly deteriorates.

And so things that previous generations thought were clear are now called unclear. This is very clear in the area of homosexuality. Now this is what Brian McLaren says: "Most of the emerging leaders I know share my agony over this question," on the issue of homosexuality. "Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality." See, for 2000 years of church history everybody believed what the Bible said about homosexuality. Now it's become unclear. Notice what he says: "We've heard all the sides." You see the epistemology at work there. The epistemology is I can't trust what I'm reading so I've got to be in dialogue with someone I disagree with. "We've heard all the sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say 'it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us'... Perhaps a five-year moratorium on making announcements." [Brian McClaren, cited in *Oakland*, 212] And so what he's saying is let's just stop talking about the issue of homosexuality for five years until we can reach group consensus.

Now what does the Bible teach about this? The Bible teaches on this area of epistemology something called perspicuity. Perspicuity means that the basic message of the Bible is clear. God did not write a book to throw us into confusion. There always is a little element of truth to any heresy. Peter, regarding Paul's writings, said in 2 Peter 3:16, some of the things Paul says are hard to understand. Notice the word "some." Peter doesn't say everything Paul says is hard to understand. Peter doesn't say what Paul writes is impossible to understand. So there's an element of truth. There are some parts of the Bible that are more difficult to understand than others. But what the emergent church is doing is they're taking a concept that's true and they're expanding it to everything. They're rendering it to things that are clear. There are things in the Bible that are very clear and they're rendering even those things unclear.

What the Bible teaches is you can develop certainty on what it is proclaiming. Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 and he says study and show yourself approved. The notion of studying and showing yourself approved means you can arrive at some form of truth. Luke, in writing to Theophilus says, "I write these things to you that you may become certain in what you have believed." 1 John 5:13 says I write these things to you that know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, "that you may know you have eternal life." All of those verses teach the reality of certainty.

Who is it, really, at the end of the day, that's creating uncertainty? It's the devil. It really is the first lie that the serpent spoke to Eve. The serpent came to Eve and spoke something very similar in comparison to what you read in the emergent church writings. The serpent said "did God say?" "Has God really said regarding the commandment about the tree of knowledge?" "Has God really said that?" And generally what's happening in the emergent church is unbelief is masquerading as uncertainty. The emergent church leaders and theologians have come along and they have, in my mind, simply decided that certain things of the Bible are no longer applicable. They are no longer believe certain things of the Bible. But they can't come out and say that. They can't say, "well, I don't believe that part of the Bible about homosexuality." They can't say that because if they said that we would say, "aha, you're liberal," which they would be. Liberalism is a denial of Scripture. There's a different game at work. There's a different dynamic at work. Instead of saying I don't believe that part of the Bible, they simply say that part of the Bible is unclear. And what is happening is what liberals used to do in terms of rendering certain parts of the Bible obsolete by saying I don't believe that any more. The emergent church is now using a different term, the term of uncertainty. Unbelief is actually masquerading as uncertainty.

And if, by the way, you have any questions about the issue of homosexuality, and why 2000 years of church history have condemned the practice of homosexuality, all you do is read these verses, [Genesis 1:27; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Matthew 19:3-6; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Jude 7]. It doesn't take somebody with three doctorates to understand that the God of the Bible affirms heterosexuality and condemns homosexuality. Homosexuality is a sin just like any other sin. It's just like murder, gluttony, greed, and covetousness. Yet what's happening is things that were once declared clear are suddenly becoming unclear. This is all an outworking of the emergent church's epistemology.

Scripture

What does the emergent church teach about the issue of Scripture? And there's an interesting pattern. Whenever somebody comes along and they want to make a, sort of top to bottom change of Christianity, what always has to happen is Scripture itself has to be demoted. Scripture has to lose its place of authority in the church because there's no way we would embrace all of these changes that are happening unless the Scripture loses its place of authority. The Scripture is the first to go since it seems to contradict what the emergent church is teaching.

So what does the emergent church teach about the doctrine of Scripture? Here's Brian McClaren, one of their key advocates. "Anglicans have demonstrated this both/and beautifully in relation to Scripture. Scripture is always a factor in Anglican thinking. In Anglican's best moments, it is their primary factor, but it is never...the only factor. Rather Scripture is in dialogue with tradition, reason and experience. None of them sola can be the ultimate source of authority..." [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 210] So what you find in the writings of the emergent church is a rejection of the Reformation principle, *sola Scriptura*, which simply means Scripture by itself, or Scripture alone, or Scripture as the ultimate source of authority.

And in essence what he is doing in this particular statement is he is elevating reason, tradition and experience to almost the same level of Scripture. Now again, what does the Bible say? What is different on this list: reason, tradition, experience and Scripture. Scripture by itself is different because beyond any of those other ingredients that I mentioned, only the Scripture is breathed by God. This factor puts the Scripture in a class or a category of its own. 2 Timothy 3:16, says, "All Scripture is

inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteous, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped,” or “adequately equipped for every good work.”

Jesus never put tradition on the same level as Scripture. In fact, Jesus, to the religious leaders of His day told them, in Mark 7:13, you have made null the Word of God through your traditions. Reason, or our intellectual powers, which indeed are a gift from God, should not be placed on the same level as Scripture. Now why is that? Because reason or intellect in a fallen human being can go astray. Reason or logic, when it’s not hemmed in by divine revelation, can go astray. The Scripture warns us about this over and over again. Proverbs 3:5 says, “Lean not on your own understanding.” Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is death.” Isaiah 55:8-9, God says, “My ways are higher than your ways.”

Experience itself should not be placed on the same level as Scripture, because what you find as you study the Bible is that Satan can give all sorts of counterfeit experiences to people. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 we learn of a man who is coming, the lawless one, whose life will be in accord with all of the counterfeit signs and wonders as worked by Satan. See, the lawless one will give all the experiences people want, yet obviously those experiences are not of God.

So what is unique about Scripture in comparison to these other things? The Scripture alone is inspired by God. Now let me give you a qualifying statement. I enjoy tradition. I enjoy reading the church fathers. But there are many times when the church fathers depart from Scripture. When the church fathers depart from Scripture, I depart from the church fathers. I enjoy experiences. I think sometimes God can give us wonderful experiences, but that should not be put on the same level as Scripture. Where my experience departs from Scripture I must depart from experience. My intellect, the mind that God has given us, is also a gift. But where my mind is drawing conclusions that are inconsistent with Scripture I have to depart from my intellectual powers.

So all of those things, as Brian McClaren said, are indeed gifts from God. However, elevating them to the same level of Scripture is wrong. This is a major step that the emergent church is making. There is a demotion of Scripture and a promotion of reason, tradition and experience to that same level.

Church

Let me move to a fourth area. I’m going to make most of my remarks here because this is the area where the emergent church is making the most headway. It has to do with church or the doctrine of the church. And what they want to see is an alteration of the way church is done.

Worship Gathering

Worship Service

Let me make some comments about the worship service. What is a worship service like in the emergent church? It’s called multi-sensory, liturgical and contemplative. Here’s an emergent writer. “Post-moderns,” (that would be the younger people) “prefer to encounter Christ by using all their senses. That’s part of the appeal of classical liturgical or contemplative worship: the incense and candles, making the sign of the cross, the taste and smell of the bread and wine, touching icons and being anointed with oil” [Julie B. Sevig, *The Lutheran*, 9/2001].

“...multisensory and interactive,” says Dan Kimball, “Through various experimental elements as well as through the space itself, we can actually preach. Art preaches. Scripture preaches. Music preaches. Even silence preaches.” [Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 186]

So what you have as you walk into an emergent church is very different than the church that we’re meeting in here. There is much more of a liturgical element. Here is what I mean by that: incense, candles, the signs of the cross, the taste and the smell of the bread and wine, icons, being anointed with oil, statues, prayer stations, the darkening of the sanctuary, even the labyrinth (which is sort of like a maze that you walk through and as you walk through this maze you have a spiritual experience), Ash Wednesday, Holidays, Advent, Lent, Pentecost. These are all things that are part of an emergent church worship service. This, in the minds of the emergent church theologians, is what will attract this multisensory oriented generation to the cross.

And believe it or not, all around this country things are happening that to most people seem strange. Churches that were once Bible based are drifting into more of a liturgical, mystical style of worship. And your average parishioner doesn’t understand why. Why is the sanctuary being darkened? Why are the icons suddenly brought up on the platform? The answer is there’s a drifting in that particular leadership of that church into an emergent mentality. The one on one prayer life of the emergent church parishioner is very different than our prayer life. Their prayer life involves visualization, recitation, and control of breathing. It’s very common in emergent church teachings to want to combine Buddhism with the worship style of Christianity or yoga with the worship style of Christianity. There’s a tremendous mindset in the emergent church that there were religious worship practices which existed prior to the Reformation that had been lost. Our obligation as Christians is to go back and retrieve those ancient worship practices.

Brian McClaren puts it this way: “...it was from Catholic contemplatives that I entered an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts of the Spirit.” [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 175] He’s speaking there of the church fathers, the desert fathers and all of these monks and mystics from a previous era. Supposedly they represented a facet of worship that was true, that was accurate, and that has been lost. It is our responsibility to go back and retrieve those things. This is a very common mindset in the emergent church.

What does the Bible teach about this? What the Bible says is if you want to go back into church history and retrieve ancient practices, why not go back to the beginning? The beginning or the apostolic era was the time when the church was as its purest form? The Apostle Paul said, “For I know that after this, after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” Paul specifically said that after I leave savage wolves will enter. Well, if we want to go backwards in time in Christianity let’s go back to the apostolic generation. Let’s go back to Paul’s generation before savage wolves came in. Where are we ever told in Scripture that it is essential to go back and embrace ancient liturgical and contemplative practices that snuck into the church in the pre Reformation dark ages.

I believe Jesus, in Matthew 6:7 condemned this very practice. [“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.”] He condemned the mixing of paganism with Christianity in order to incorporate it into one’s prayer life. He said when you pray, don’t babble on aimlessly, as do the heathen, or as do the pagan.

Preaching

Well what about preaching? What is happening in the emergent church in the area of preaching? What you find over and over again in the emergent church is there is a slighting, minimalizing, or marginalizing of the practice where someone gets up who has studied the Word of God all week and expounds God's Word to God's people. We have here a pulpit not to deify the preacher. It's raised up out of respect for God's Word. This whole art is becoming very rapidly in the emergent church a lost art. Emergent church preaching has become storytelling, conversational, and experiential. In fact, you don't even have preachers in the emergent church. What you have is a group facilitator and someone who guides a conversation and the group as a whole determines what the text means. And this is an outworking of the epistemology of the emergent church that I described for you earlier.

The emergent church believes that when we read the Bible we are reading our own biases into the Bible? So why should I go listen to someone who has studied God's Word all week and wants to share it from a pulpit? Why should I listen to him? All he is doing is reading his own biases back into Scripture. Out in the emergent church are the following: exegesis, exposition, the study of doctrine, the study of theology. All of that is out.

And notice these quotes. Here is Doug Pagitt, an emergent church teacher. "At Solomon's porch, sermons are not primarily about extracting truth from the Bible to apply to people's lives..." (I thought that was what we were supposed to be doing). "So our sermons are not lessons that precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation." [Doug Pagitt, cited in *Oakland*, 41-42]. Dan Kimball says this: "It isn't about clever apologetics or careful exegetical or expository preaching... Emerging generations are hungering to experience God in worship." [*The Emerging Church*, 116] Leonard Sweet, "A spiritual Tsunami has hit postmodern culture. The wave will build without breaking for decades to come. The wave is this: People want to know God. They want less to know about God... they want new experiences, especially new experiences of the divine." [*Soul Tsunami*, 420]

The thread that you see through all of these quotes is an elevation of experience over truth. Brian McLaren describes his Christianity as "...something beyond a belief system or doctrinal array or even a practice. I mean an attitude—an attitude toward God and our neighbor and our mission that is passionate. [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 117-18] It's very common to hear statements like this: don't give me doctrine, give me Jesus. Don't give me creed, give me Christ. The question I have for people who think along those lines is this: how do you know you're worshiping the right Jesus? You cannot know whether you're worshiping the right Jesus without doctrine. The Bible informs us over and over and over again of a counterfeit Jesus.

Now what does the Bible teach about this whole issue of preaching and teaching. As I study the Bible I find that the Bible places a tremendous priority on it. In fact, in Acts 2:42, when the early church met, there's a list of things that they gave themselves to. What's the first thing mentioned on the list? What is the very first thing that the early church gave themselves to? Think of all of the things that are mentioned in Acts 2. They gave themselves, on that list, to baptism, benevolence, communion, prayer, service, etc...Although there are many things that the early church did, the very first thing mentioned is doctrine. Acts 2:42 says, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Why is that? Because doctrine teaches you how to do everything else on the list.

How can we ever read 2 Timothy 3:15- 4:2 without seeing the priority of preaching and teaching. This, in fact, is what the Apostle Paul told Timothy to do, to preach the word, in season and out of season, correct and rebuke with great patience for the time will come when men will no longer endure sound doctrine. [3:15, “And that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; [17] so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. 4:1, I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: [2] preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. [3] For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, [4] and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.”]

We have in our Bible Nehemiah 8, where Ezra, the scribe, stands on a very high platform and he begins to read the Law of God. The priests are helping him explain the law of God so as to make it understandable to God’s people. What happened the moment that event took place? A revival broke out in postexilic Judaism because the people of God returned to the Word of God.

People today are talking over and over again about a coming revival or a coming spiritual awakening. Yet every time in Scripture when you see a revival or an awakening taking place it is always preceded by something. What always precedes it is a return to God’s truth. You cannot have an awakening or a revival in God’s people without the Word of God. The Word of God is the means by which He brings men and women to Himself. It’s the means by which He reveals to us sin in our lives. It just doesn’t happen in a box. It doesn’t happen independently. Rather, it happens through the Word of God. There was a revival that broke out in Josiah’s day and what preceded that revival? They found the Word of God in the temple that had been neglected for centuries. That single event preceded a spiritual awakening. Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

And I sometimes wondering if we are entering a new dark ages. The dark ages was a terrible time in church history where people were told that they could not understand the Word of God on their own. The Word of God had to be interpreted to them through a priest. The Word of God was literally chained to pulpits, and your average person had no access to God’s Word. When I read these statements by Brian McClaren and others, constantly criticizing the proclamation and the public preaching and teaching of God’s Word I wonder if we’re entering into a new dark ages. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard this story. I have the opportunity to travel around to different places and I hear this over and over again. No matter where I go in this country people will say can you tell me where to find a good Bible teaching church, because there’s not one in my area. I hear that virtually everywhere. What is happening is there is a famine for the Word of God as we have drifted away from God’s Word into these alternative philosophies.

Nature of the Church

Let me make a few comments on the nature of the church. What does the emergent church teach about the nature of the church?

Kingdom

They believe the church is the Kingdom and the Kingdom is the church. They don't distinguish church and Kingdom. Doug Pagitt says "The Kingdom of God is a central conversation in emerging communities... And let me tell you, 'Kingdom of God' language is really big in the emerging church." [cited in *Oakland*, 163] What does the Bible teach? The Bible teaches that we're not in the Kingdom right now. Gosh, if we're in the Kingdom now I must be living on the wrong side of town because I don't see Kingdom conditions. When the Kingdom comes there'll be no more agricultural disparity. There'll be no more social injustice. There'll be no more war. The Kingdom itself cannot come through human effort. The Kingdom can only come when a particular condition is met and that condition is the repentance of national Israel. The moment national Israel repents the Kingdom will be established. This is a doctrine that we teach here called premillennialism. First comes the King and then comes the Kingdom. You cannot have a Kingdom without the King. It is an impossibility. Yet the emergent church is teaching that we are in the Kingdom now.

Dr. Toussaint, who many of you know, one time in class put it this way. He said you can have a worldwide revival and a worldwide awakening. You could literally have every person on planet earth come to Christ. However, if tiny Israel remains in unbelief as a Christ-rejecting nation then the Kingdom will not come. Conversely, you could have the whole world reject Jesus Christ. Yet if tiny Israel bows the knee to Jesus Christ immediately the Kingdom will come. The Kingdom, in Matthew 23:37-39 and many other places, teaches that the kingdom will come but that condition has to be met first.

Social Gospel

What is the emergent church teaching in the area of social gospel? What is the social gospel? The social gospel is the idea that the church's responsibility is to clean up the world. It's not to save people out of the world but rather it's to fix the world's problems. Brian McClaren puts it this way. "The church has been preoccupation with the question, 'What happens to your soul after you die? As if the reason for Jesus coming can be summed up in 'Jesus is trying to get more souls into heaven as opposed to hell, after they die.' I just think a fair reading of the Gospels blows that out of the water." [cited in *Oakland*, 203]

Brian McClaren goes on and he says, "He selected 12 and trained them in a new way of life. He sent them to teach everyone this new way of life... Even if only a few would practice this new way, many would benefit. Oppressed people would be free. Poor people would be liberated from poverty. Minorities would be treated with respect. Sinners would be loved, not resented. Industrialists would realize that God cares for sparrows and wildflowers—so their industries should respect, not rape, the environment. The homeless would be invited in for a hot meal. The kingdom of God would come—not everywhere at once, not suddenly, but gradually like a seed growing in a field, like yeast spreading in a lump of bread dough, like light spreading across the sky at dawn." [*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 111]

This language is classic social gospel language. It's the idea that the church's function is no longer simply to preach and teach the gospel. In fact, the church's function is to cure society of its ills, to solve cancer problems, to deal with the global warming problem, to deal with overpopulation, to deal with world hunger, and to bring in racial reconciliation and social justice. I'm not saying that we, as Christians, can't have a voice, sometimes in those issues and bring a Christian perspective to those issues. But the fact of the matter remains: the world will remain in Satan's grasp until the Second Coming of Christ. We're not on our own turf. We're on Satan's turf. He is called the "god of this age."

It's not until the kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our God (Revelation 11:15), that we will see Kingdom conditions.

In the meantime, what is the church's function? Why does the church exist? The church has three basic tasks. Number 1, to glorify God. Number 2, to edify the saints. And number 3, to evangelize the lost. Our function is to reach and to teach. Social issues may have their place in our thinking. I'm simply saying that that is not the primary purpose of our existence. And yet the emergent church seems to be drifting in the opposite direction in the way it puts social issues ahead of the church's primary function of evangelism and discipleship.

Ecumenism

What is the emergent church teaching in the area of ecumenism? Ecumenism can be summed up in this way: it is the "urge to merge." It is the desire to merge with different religious groups that think differently than we do on doctrinal matters. Notice what Robert Webber says: "A goal for evangelicals in the postmodern world is to accept diversity as a historical reality, but to seek unity in the midst of it. This perspective will allow us to see Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches as various forms of the true church, all based on apostolic teaching and authority, finding common ground," (that's the key phrase), "in the faith expressed by classical Christianity." [Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 85] And this is what we call credalism, or minimalism, or ecumenism, or the urge to merge. The urge to merge is this desire that Christians have to merge with other groups that have a different doctrinal belief system than we do for the purpose of fighting world hunger, or poverty, or social injustice, or something like that.

Now what does the Bible teach? The Bible teaches unity, to be sure. Jesus prayed in John 17 that we would be one, as He and the Father are one. And everybody quotes John 17:20-23 to prove that point, but they always leave out verse 17. Verse 17 precedes the call for unity. And verse 17 simply says, "Sanctify them in the truth: Your word is truth." In other words, the biblical position is this: unity is wonderful, but you do not sacrifice truth to get to unity. In other words, we don't water down or dumb down or marginalize or minimize certain doctrines that are clearly taught in the Bible for the sake of unity. True biblical unity is built on a platform of truth rather than simply watering down doctrinal truths for the sake of unity.

The early church was unified. And yet they were built on an apostolic foundation (Eph. 2:20). The tower of Babel was unified, yet it was not built on a doctrinal foundation. So this is a word you're going to hear more and more as the days progress: ecumenism.

Christology

Let's move to the doctrine of Christ. What does the emergent church believe about the doctrine of Christ. As I began to research this I was horrified to find that there are many emergent church writers that are watering down the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ. Here is what a couple of emergent writers say, "a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence has not even committed.... If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil." [Chalke and Mann, cited in Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 694] What he has just done here in this quote is he has analogized the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ to a form of cosmic child abuse.

Now what is the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ? If we don't have the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ in our belief system, then we don't have Christianity any more. That's how critical this doctrine is. The penal substitutionary atonement of Christ is simply this: God the Father poured out His wrath that deserves to be poured out on a sinful world because of their sin. But instead of pouring out His wrath upon the world He pours out His wrath upon His own Son. The Son is the sin-bearer. The Son, God the Son, Jesus Christ, absorbed the wrath of God that rightfully belongs upon me and rightfully belongs upon you, in my place. He took the sting for me. He bore the penalty in my place. If I am connected to Him by faith, no longer do I have to face the prospect of a fiery indignation because the penalty has been absorbed. When He died on that cross screamed the word *tetelestai*, which is an Aramaic word that means "paid in full."

This is how God has chosen to deal with the sin question. This is how the holiness of God is satisfied while at the same time His mercy is satisfied. Because His wrath has been poured out upon His Son, He does not have to pour out His wrath upon all of humanity. Therefore, if we are in Him, we are exempted from the wrath of God. It's very similar to the Passover. The Jews, in order to be exempted from the curse that God brought upon the firstborn in Egypt, were simply told to put blood on the doorpost. As God passed over and saw the blood on the doorpost He did not impose a penalty on that house because the wrath that He had against Egypt had been absorbed by this animal as signified by the blood on the doorpost.

Similarly, when God the Father finds you in the blood of God the Son, His wrath against your sin that you have committed, past, present and future, passes right over. It's a wonderful teaching of the Bible. Hebrews 9:22 says, "Without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sin." Isaiah 53:5 says, "He was bruised for our iniquities, He was wounded for our transgression; the chastisement that should fall upon me was borne by Him." It's a majestic doctrine. To take that truth and that glorious concept and analogize it to a form of cosmic child abuse shows you where this movement is headed. The movement wants the title "biblical." It wants the title "evangelical." Yet to make a derogatory comment about the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ takes you very rapidly outside the pail of orthodoxy.

Eschatology

What does the emergent church teach about prophecy? What do they teach about the end time? Do they believe there'll be an end time? Do they believe there'll be a Millennial Kingdom? Do they believe there'll be a rapture? What do they teach about those things? What you find as you study their statements is they really have no tolerance for those types of doctrines. The reason is because they think that the Kingdom has already begun. This is what we call in theology "inaugurated eschatology" or "realized eschatology."

Brian McClaren says: "If Revelation were a blueprint of the distant future, it would have been unintelligible to its original readers... In light of this, Revelation becomes a powerful book about the kingdom of God here and now, available to all." [*Oakland*, 158]. They use language like this: "the future has broken into the present." They use words like this: "the kingdom already exists." And the moment you begin to move down that road here's what happens. Your interest in studying the end times, eschatology, prophecy, and learning God's blueprint for the future begins to wane. Why should I be concerned about what God is going to do in the future to bring about His Kingdom on earth? The Kingdom already exists.

An emergent writer talks about what the church is going to be like down the road. He says this: “Biblical signs such as baptismal identity and Eucharistic thanksgiving will take on new meaning.” Notice this next statement: “The church will be less concerned about having an eschatology and more committed to being an eschatological community.” [Interview by Jordan Cooper with Robert Webber, cited in *Oakland*, 136] Why study eschatology? Why study the end times? Why study prophecy? Why study the rapture of the church? There’s no point in studying those things because the eschaton has begun. The Kingdom has begun. The moment that happens you’re interest in studying God’s future blueprint for the end begins to disappear. The emergent church is very critical of an individual, for example, like Tim LaHaye, who through a paperback series called the *Left Behind* series has spread the truth of eschatology far beyond the four walls of any church. Yet, as you go to their websites and read their statements about a man like Timothy LaHaye, who in my estimation has been used mightily by God, you find constant criticism, and constant derogatory statements.

So what does the Bible teach about prophecy? 27% of Scripture was prophetic at the time it was written. There is 27% of the material in your Bible that was prophetic or future oriented at the time it was written. Now some of those prophecies have been fulfilled, some have not. But the fact that God would devote over a quarter of the Bible to prophecy shows me that this is a subject that is important to God. 2 Peter 1:19 analogizes prophecy to a light shining in a dark place. What he says there is that the world is in darkness. The morning star, or Jesus Christ, has not yet come. The Kingdom is not yet present. The world is in a state of darkness. So what gives us hope? It’s the light of prophecy. That’s why he analogizes prophecy to a lamp or a light shining in a dark place. He says you would do well to pay attention to it.

You know, most people in this world have absolutely no hope for the future. Their hope is tied up in the stock market. Their hope is tied up in the economy. Their hope is tied up in their retirement investments or whether they made the right investments or not. Their hope is tied up in their retirement plan. Their hope is tied up in some manmade plan that they have for the future. And yet as we have seen in recent days, assets can deteriorate, can’t they? The economy can slow down. The value of homes can decrease. Unemployment can rise. As Christians we have something much greater to place our hope in than the temporal ebb and flow of life’s conditions. What we have is the prophetic Word which teaches that there is a better world coming. There is a better world coming. That’s what gives us a hope to endure in the present. I don’t know where I would be in terms of my emotional makeup and my emotional composition if I looked around this world and I said this is all there is and it’s not going to get any better. But what spurs me on and motivates me is this light shining in a dark place that Peter says we would do well to pay attention to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we’ve gone through a difficult series of teachings on a movement that is alive and well and on its way into the minds of our children. We’ve tried to equip ourselves regarding how to recognize what is happening. This is the emergent church. We’ve simply compared six categories that the emerging church believes in to the Bible. We’ve analyzed the emergent church in the area of missions, knowledge, Scripture, church, Christ, and prophecy. Our goal in the midst of all of the things we see around us is to be faithful to the light that we have been given.