

Don't Stop Believing: A Theological Critique of the Emergent Church¹

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Every generation must integrate the Christian faith with its own particular moment in history. The early church did it with Plato, the medieval church used Aristotle, the Reformers relied on the Renaissance, the modern church incorporated the Enlightenment, and now the emerging church is seeking to assimilate their faith with our new, postmodern culture.

This is a necessary, though dangerous job. The same culture that provides avenues to communicate the gospel may also, if we are not careful, compromise its most important parts. Consider the modern church. Surrounded by a scientific culture that valued proof and hard facts, modern conservatives packaged the gospel into "The Four Spiritual Laws" and defended it with *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. While these endeavors led many to Christ, emerging Christians wonder whether such intellectual approaches emphasize *knowing the right facts* rather than *doing the right acts*.

These emerging Christians are a transdenominational collection of mostly Western, white, twenty- or thirty- somethings who, like many in our postmodern culture, seek authenticity in their relationships, mystery in their worship, and remedies for the big social and economic problems of our day, such as racism, sexism, slavery, poverty, and pollution. All of this is a large improvement over the individualized gospel that many modern Christians grew up with. We all should applaud and follow their lead.

Nevertheless, there is an important segment within the emerging church which is going beyond this call for authentic Christian living and permitting our postmodern culture to significantly influence its beliefs. The leaders of this group are found in Emergent Village, a loose-knit organization which arose from friendships formed during Leadership Network meetings in the late 1990s. Labels can be controversial in this fluid environment, but I will follow the increasingly common practice of calling this group "Emergent" in order to distinguish it from the more conservative "emerging" church.² Theologically, Emergents view themselves as the productive union of postliberalism on the left (e.g., Hans Frei and George Lindbeck) and postconservatism on the right (e.g., John Franke and Roger Olson).³ They explicitly seek to transcend the labels of left and right, and alleging that these terms are leftovers from modernity, suggest that the fact that they are postmodern may enable them to do so.⁴

Emergent's most influential authors include Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Peter Rollins, and John Caputo (the latter may not call himself "Emergent," but he is a friend and contributor to the movement).⁵ While these writers may not agree on every point, their writings taken collectively seem to advocate an

inclusive soteriology, an optimistic anthropology, and a humble epistemology.⁶ On each issue they are reacting, at least in part, to a narrow fundamentalism which no longer seems plausible in a postmodern age. While they are right to correct the errors in this conservative extreme, their repudiation of fundamentalist excess risks falling off the opposite side into liberalism. I will demonstrate this danger by closing this essay with a brief comparison of Emergent statements and the views expressed by the liberal opponents of J. Gresham Machen in his 1923 book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

Inclusive Soteriology

Conservative Christians cite Acts 4:12 (“Salvation is found in no one else”) and John 14:6 (“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”) to support their claim that sinners must repent and believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Many Emergent leaders grew up with this conservative gospel and are now reacting against it. Perhaps influenced in part by our culture’s value on inclusion—where every child is above average and receives a trophy just for participating—several Emergent authors say that we must not exclude others from the family of God simply because they believe differently. Rather than separate people into in- and out-groups, we should recognize that we are all God’s children, accepted by him just as we are.

Brian McLaren introduces this idea when he has Markus, the wisest character in his fictional story, say that “Maybe God’s plan is an opt-out plan, not an opt-in one. If you want to stay out of the party, you can. Nobody will force you to enjoy it.”⁷ Spencer Burke goes beyond “maybe” and states matter-of-factly that salvation is not an opt-in program. He writes: “We’re in unless we choose to be out. That is how grace works. We don’t opt in to it—we can only opt out.”⁸ Burke explains:

Religion declares that we are separated from God, that we are “outsiders.” Grace tells us the opposite; we are already in unless we want to be out. This is the real scandal of Jesus. His message eradicated the need for religion. It may come as a surprise, but Jesus has never been in the religion business. He’s in the business of grace, and grace tells us there is nothing we need to do to find relationship with the divine. The relationship is already there; we only need to nurture it.⁹

To make sure we get the point, Burke repeats his liberating message: “As I’ve said, grace is an opt-out issue, not an opt-in one. God wants us at his party, just because we exist.”¹⁰

This Emergent brand of inclusivism is more open than the traditional kind. Inclusivists have generally insisted that, while sinners may not need to hear the gospel in order to be saved, they at least must respond to God’s general revelation. For example, the Council of Vatican II declared that “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere

heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”¹¹

Emergent inclusivists have lowered the bar further. Unlike traditional inclusivists, who argue that sinners must reach toward and obey the God they know, Burke says that we do not need to do or believe anything to be saved, for we are in unless we choose to be out. Traditional inclusivists assert that we must believe or do *something*, however minimal, to be saved. Emergent’s postmodern version declares that we are saved even if we believe or do *nothing*. We are born already on the inside. And unless we intentionally sabotage our salvation, staring the God of grace in the face and telling him that we want out—inside is where we will stay.

This value on inclusion leads many Emergents to interpret exclusive-sounding texts of scripture in inclusive ways. For example, McLaren warns that Jesus did not mean in John 14:6 that “I am in the way of people seeking truth and life. I won’t let anyone get to God unless he comes through me.” McLaren continues: “The name of Jesus, whose life and message resonated with acceptance, welcome, and inclusion, has too often become a symbol of elitism, exclusion, and aggression.”¹² He fears that, “For some people, it seems that Jesus is not the way to God, but rather he is *in* the way to God, as if he is saying, ‘No you don’t! You can’t come to God unless you get by me first!’”¹³

If this is what Jesus did not mean, Burke goes further and tells us what he did. Like many Emergents, Burke states that following the way of Jesus is about how we live rather than what we believe. He explains: “When Jesus described himself as “the way,” he seemed to be telling his followers that violence or conformity to other systems and structures is not the way to God. Instead, the way is found in the path he laid out.” This path “is not about competing with other faith traditions. It’s about living out a way of grace, love, forgiveness, and peace.”¹⁴

In *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, which is a compilation of essays from Emergent authors on various subjects, Samir Selmanovic illustrates this new emphasis on ethics over beliefs. He describes an Indian chief’s reluctance to become a Christian because he did not want to go to paradise if the rest of his family was in hell. Selmanovic writes that the chief’s decision was “moved by the Holy Spirit,” for though he did not pledge “allegiance to the name of Christ,” the chief did “want to be like him and thus accept him at a deeper level.” Because Jesus is love, the chief’s choice to not believe in Jesus out of love for his family is more “Christlike” than if he had accepted “the name of Christ.”¹⁵

So the chief followed Christ by not believing in him? Besides wondering how Selmanovic would interpret Jesus’ stern warning that “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more

than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37; cf. Lk. 14:26), this story illustrates the ultimate end of placing ethics over doctrine. Once we concede that sinners need not believe in Jesus to be saved, there is little to prevent us from concluding, like Selmanovic, that some may be saved by not believing in him.

Optimistic Anthropology

Emergents' inclusive soteriology is supported by their overly optimistic anthropology. Unlike conservatives, who sometimes emphasize the Fall until they imagine that sinners are wretched worms (e.g., "Would He devote that sacred head for *such a worm as I?*"),¹⁶ Emergents tend to stretch the goodness of Creation and common grace until they have no more use for the doctrine of original sin.

For example, Doug Pagitt argues that "the theology of depravity was yet another hand-me-down from the fifth century and the church's efforts to create a clear Greek-Christian hybrid."¹⁷ Leaving aside his mistaken belief that the notion of original sin originated when Augustine imported Greek philosophy into the Christian faith, it is worth noting why Pagitt opposes the doctrine of total depravity.

First, Pagitt says that original sin does not fit our experience. He writes that no one walks through a maternity ward and says, "'Oh, what a collection we have here of dirty, rotten, little sinners who are separate from God and only capable of evil!' Rather, the impulse is to say, 'What wondrous, beautiful miracles.' ...New life just doesn't seem to fit with this notion of inherent depravity."¹⁸ Second, Pagitt asserts that original sin is unchristian. He thinks that to suggest that Adam's "fallen state somehow changed the nature of humanity," leaving us "inherently evil to the core" so that "humanity is evil and depraved and that we enter the world this way," would deny our value as image bearers of God.¹⁹ He claims that "When we believe that people are inherently godly rather than inherently depraved, it follows that all people have worth, that all people have God-inspired goodness to offer."²⁰

Rather than accept the traditional view that Adam's "original status was lost and replaced by original sin and a debased version of humanity that was then passed from parent to child like a genetic disease," Pagitt suggests that sin comes through various forms—"whether through our habits and systems, our intentions or the doing of others, or our bodies and biology."²¹ Rather than think that our babies are "full of sin" and "ourselves as freed from sin and growing in goodness" because we are baptized, we should believe that we are "the ones deeply affected by the sin that comes as we live our lives, and we hope that our children can avoid it whenever possible."²²

Pagitt seems unconcerned that his denial of original sin identifies him with the thought of Pelagius. He argues that Pelagius should not have been excommunicated by the

church, for his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature supplies a welcome counterbalance to Augustine's emphasis on our depravity. Pagitt claims that Augustine's belief that "people were born separate from God" fit the Greek understanding of God popular in the Roman Empire. This allowed him to defeat Pelagius' alien, Druid notion that "people were born with the Light of God aflame within them, if even dimly lit." But since Augustine's view is not necessarily better, Pagitt says that we should remain open to the insights of Pelagius, remembering that "different cultures will have different expressions" of the Christian faith.²³

Spencer Burke also denies the significance of sin. He writes that grace is "not conditional on recognizing or renouncing sin" but "it comes to us whether or not we ask for it. We don't have to do something to receive it, nor do we even have to respond to it in some way. It simply comes."²⁴ And so he claims that we must move beyond traditional notions of sin. He explains:

Although the link between grace and sin has driven Christianity for centuries, it just doesn't resonate in our culture anymore. It repulses rather than attracts. People are becoming much less inclined to acknowledge themselves as "sinners in need of a Savior." It's not that people view themselves as perfect; it's that the language they use to describe themselves has changed. "Broken," "fragmented," and "lacking wholeness" — these are some of the new ways people describe their spiritual need. What resonates is a sense of disconnection.²⁵

Likewise, Tony Jones agrees that gospel presentations have focused too much on sin. He writes:

A generation or two ago, defenses of Christianity that focused on human sinfulness were potent; a common metaphor showed God on one side of a diagram and a stick figure (you) on the other; the chasm between was labeled "Sin," and the only bridge across was in the shape of Jesus' cross. But emergents ask, "What kind of God can't reach across a chasm? Chasms can't stop God!"²⁶

I am not sure what Jones is objecting to here, for the metaphor's point is that while the chasm prevents us from coming to God, it does not stop God from reaching across. Perhaps he means that God should be able to reach us in some other way besides the cross? Or perhaps that our sin does not separate us from God? The latter seems the case, given how Jones' self-described best friend Doug Pagitt objects to the metaphor.²⁷ Pagitt denies "that human beings are inherently depraved and broken and that's why our perfect God cannot be in a relationship with us until we are fixed up." He says that "There is nothing in the story [of the Fall] that tells us that God steps over to the other side of some great chasm once Eve bites down on that fruit."²⁸

Like Pagitt, Jones seems to think that sin comes from an external source in our environment. He acknowledges that "many emergent Christians will concur that we live in a sinful world, a world of wars and famines and pogroms. But they will be

inclined to attribute this sin not to the distance between human beings and God but to the broken relationships that clutter our lives and our world."²⁹

I agree with Jones that we suffer from broken relationships and many varieties of social evil, but are these the main source of sin? Did not Jesus say that sin comes from the heart—from the inside out rather than from the outside in? (Matt. 15:18-20). If sin is external then the cross need only be, in Jones' words, "an act of divine solidarity with the suffering and broken world."³⁰ But if the root cause of sin lies within every human heart then the cross must be powerful enough to cleanse us from the inside.

And so Emergent's inclusive soteriology and optimistic anthropology leads to a deficient view of the atonement. While Emergents rightly remind us that we need every theory of the atonement, many of them do not allow for penal substitution. These Emergents accept that Jesus was our substitute but they object to the idea that he bore our penalty.³¹ They prefer the Christus Victor model, which states that Jesus paid his life as a ransom to Satan (which is true) than that he endured his Father's wrath in our place (which is also true; see Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21). Some Emergents hint that penal substitution cashes out as "divine child abuse," for the Father demands the life of his Son before he is willing to forgive sinners.³² Brian McLaren summarizes Emergent's concern: "If God was going to forgive us, why didn't he just forgive us? Why did Jesus have to die so that we could be forgiven? Having an innocent person die for guilty people did not seem to solve the 'injustice' of forgiveness—it only seemed to add to the injustice. So, why did Jesus have to die?"³³

In reply, one might briefly point out that God offered himself on the cross. We cannot divide the persons of the Father and Son and then charge the Father with child abuse for sacrificing another. Second, God is not able to forgive without penalty, but not because, as Neil says in McLaren's story, God is "a nice guy caught in a tough fix. He wants to forgive us, but he has to play by the rules of the court."³⁴ When God forgives sin he is not obliging some external law or higher standard, but his own righteous and loving nature. If God is love and God is life, then selfishness, which is the opposite of God, must lead to death. Because sin necessarily ends in death, God cannot forgive sin without the ultimate sacrifice.

And because God paid what his loving and righteous nature demanded, we are able to forgive others without demanding payment in return. When we forgive others without strings attached, we are merely passing on God's forgiveness to others. Since the only reason we can forgive without penalty is because God already has paid it for us, those who criticize God for being less magnanimous than they completely miss the point of the cross. They forget that forgiveness always requires satisfaction. A legal or financial debt may not be satisfied by the person who is forgiven, but it will be borne by someone. Someone always pays, whether it is the crime victim who absorbs injustice or

the bank's shareholders who write off the bad loan. There is no free lunch, either in economics or salvation.

The upshot of Emergent's high view of humanity and truncated theory of the atonement is a broadly inclusive gospel. Recently I happened upon a radio interview where an Emergent spokesperson was asked whether Protestant Christians believe that salvation is by grace through faith alone. He answered yes, for we believe that salvation is a gift. There is no quota of works that we must meet, but we simply *accept our acceptance by our Creator*.

This is a provocatively incomplete answer. True as far as it goes (God is our Creator), it is sufficiently incomplete to mislead (don't we also need God the Redeemer?). This may be the first time a Christian has affirmed salvation by grace through faith without mentioning Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and our need to repent and believe this good news. Shorn of their association with Jesus Christ, the notions of grace and faith are reduced to empty caricatures. Salvation no longer means turning from sin and trusting Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, but merely believing that God has accepted us all along.

Humble Epistemology

Some may wonder how Emergents square this inclusive soteriology and optimistic anthropology with Scripture. Here they reveal another important difference from their conservative interlocutors. Unlike conservative Christians, who often testify too confidently to what they know from the Word of God, Emergent Christians remind us that God is larger than our finite categories. Where conservatives emphasize answers that give assurance, Emergents embrace questions which ponder the mystery of God. While this is a helpful rejoinder to conservative hubris, Emergents demonstrate again that those who steer out of a conservative slide tend to overcorrect. Conservatives sometimes may be proud and pushy, but Emergents can be so humble that they mumble. At the end of the day, it isn't always clear what they know about God.

For starters, some seem to deny that we have a revelation. For instance, John Caputo asserts that religious pluralism prevents us from confidently claiming that we have a revelation. We may believe that we have received a revelation, but this belief conflicts with other faith communities, many of whom doubt our revelation. Consequently, we should humbly concede that our supposed revelation does not give us a corner on the truth but is merely one perspective among many. He writes:

That means that the believers in that Book should temper their claims about The Revelation they (believe they) have received, since it is their interpretation that they have received a revelation, while not everyone else agrees. A revelation is an interpretation that the believers believe is a revelation, which means that it is one more competing entry

in the conflict of interpretations. Believers should accordingly resist becoming triumphalistic about what they believe, either personally or in their particular community.³⁵

Peter Rollins states that revelation is impossible because of the transcendence of God. In his popular book, *How (Not) to Talk About God*, Rollins claims that God so transcends the limits of our finite minds that he is unable to reveal himself to us. Reminiscent of Kant's noumenal realm or the *via negativa* of Neo-Platonic mysticism, Rollins' thesis is that because God is incomprehensible he is also unknowable. Unlike the traditional view in which "Christianity is generally accepted to rest upon the belief that God has communicated with humanity via revelation," Rollins argues for a new perspective in which "revelation ought not to be thought of either as that which makes God known or as that which leaves God unknown, but rather as the overpowering light that renders God known *as* unknown."³⁶ Because "the manifest side of God is also hidden," Rollins concludes that "When it comes to God, we have nothing to say to others and we must not be ashamed of saying it."³⁷

Besides questioning the reliability of revelation, Emergents also remind us that our interpretations of scripture are finite and fallible. This is another helpful corrective against conservatives who may too quickly identify their interpretations with the voice of God. However, some Emergents use the possibility that our understanding may be wrong to offer new and unusual interpretations of key biblical texts. Consider Jesus' warning that most people are on the broad road that leads to destruction and only a few are on the narrow road that leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14). Brian McLaren suggests that Jesus was not speaking here of heaven and hell, but merely advising people that there are many ways to get in trouble with Rome and only a few ways to live at peace with it (Emergents often read Scripture as an attack on Empire—first Rome and then America—so they tend to see allusions to Rome in scripture which others miss).³⁸ When McLaren was asked about this novel reading, he conceded that he could be wrong but at least his view was possible. I suppose, but don't we need a better reason to overturn 2,000 years of exegesis than just "anything is possible"?

The fallout of this uncertainty regarding revelation and its interpretation leaves many Emergents with little room for doctrine. Peter Rollins illustrates the problem when he concedes that his emerging gathering, named Ikon, has a hole in its center. He writes: "Just as a doughnut has no interior, but is made up entirely of an exterior, so Ikon has no substantial doctrinal centre."³⁹ And why would it? If you do not know that you have a revelation or that your interpretation is more or less correct, then what would you insist on believing?

Since there is nothing to know, Rollins turns his attention to the only part of the Christian faith left—how we live. He replaces "right belief" with "believing in the right way," which means "believing in a loving, sacrificial, and Christlike manner."⁴⁰ He

suggests that while our Christian beliefs never describe “the Real or reality,” yet somehow they are able to transform us into lovers who follow the way of Jesus by embracing others.⁴¹ Rollins explains that “in Ikon we are unified, not on the level of some specific set of doctrines, but rather in our desire that our beliefs, whatever they are, help to enable us to be more open to the divine and more open to one another, exhibiting a loving, caring, and Christlike way of being in the world.”⁴²

Rollins’ emphasis on ethics over doctrine is reflected in the entire Emergent organization. Tony Jones, the national coordinator of Emergent Village, declares that his organization “is an amorphous collection of friends who’ve decided to live life together regardless of our ecclesial affiliations, regardless of our theological commitments.” He compares statements of faith to “drawing borders, which means you have to load your weapons and place soldiers at those borders. It becomes an obsession to guard the borders. That is simply not the ministry of Jesus.”⁴³

In 2006, Emergent Village emailed a statement to its members from LeRon Shults, a significant theologian who gave three reasons why their group should not write a doctrinal statement. Besides being unnecessary and inappropriate, because “Jesus did not have a ‘statement of faith,’” and “the struggle to capture God in our finite propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry,” Shults argues that standardizing our beliefs would be a disaster. He worries that “a ‘statement of faith’ tends to stop conversation. Such statements can also easily become tools for manipulating or excluding people from the community. Too often they create an environment in which real conversation is avoided out of fear that critical reflection on one or more of the sacred propositions will lead to excommunication from the community.”⁴⁴

While I appreciate this concern for charitable conversation and our need to embrace others, I wonder how long Emergent Village can remain distinctively Christian without a statement of belief. Does being a follower of Jesus amount to being a good person who asks good questions and does good things as he enjoys good fellowship with other good people, or does it also include believing a few specific facts about Jesus, the Trinity, and the way of salvation?

Emergents’ reticence to define themselves theologically is already impacting the way they evangelize. For example, Peter Rollins claims that evangelism is a two way street. Rather than bring the knowledge of God to “unreached” peoples in “unreached” places, he says that Ikon members “seek to be evangelized” as they learn from other religions.⁴⁵ He explains: “We deemphasize the idea that Christians have God and all others don’t by attempting to engage in open two-way conversations. This does not mean we have lapsed into relativism, as we still believe in the uniqueness of our tradition, but we believe that it teaches us to be open to all. We are also genuinely open to being wrong

about parts and perhaps all our beliefs – while at the same time being fully committed to them.”⁴⁶

In his book on the kingdom of God, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, Brian McLaren strongly implies that we enter the kingdom by how we live rather than by what we believe. He warns that “Jesus did *not* come to create another exclusive religion – Judaism having been exclusive based on genetics and *Christianity being exclusive based on belief* (which can be a tougher requirement than genetics!).”⁴⁷ Instead, “the thrust of Jesus’ message is about inclusion – shocking, scandalous inclusion.”⁴⁸ Rather than “create an in-group which would banish others to an out-group, Jesus wanted to create a *come-on-in group*, one that sought and welcomed everyone.”⁴⁹ McLaren seems to imply that anyone who commits themselves to “*purposeful inclusion*,” which is the closest he comes to defining the nature of the kingdom, will by definition participate in that kingdom.⁵⁰

Apparently this is true even of those who belong to other religions. McLaren asks a series of rhetorical questions to imply that members of other religions may become better kingdom citizens than Christians. He writes:

Wouldn’t it be fascinating if thousands of **Muslims**, alienated with where fundamentalists and extremists have taken their religion, began to “take their places at the feast,” discovering the secret message of Jesus in ways that many Christians have not? Could it be that Jesus, always recognized as one of the greatest prophets of Islam, could in some way be rediscovered to save Islam from its dangerous dark side? Similarly, wouldn’t there be a certain ironic justice if Jesus’ own kinsmen, the **Jewish people**, led the way in understanding and practicing the core teaching of one of their own prophets who has too often been hijacked by other interests or ideologies? Or if **Buddhists, Hindus**, and even **former atheists and agnostics** came from “east and west and north and south” and began to enjoy the feast of the kingdom in ways that those bearing the name *Christian* have not?⁵¹

Why does McLaren use the term “former” to describe atheists and agnostics but not Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews? Is he saying that people may enter the kingdom without leaving their non-Christian religions behind?⁵²

Samir Selmanovic clearly thinks so. In his essay in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Selmanovic describes his friend Mark who refused to become a Christian because he thought it “would be a moral step backwards.” Yet Mark did believe that life was a gift. He thought that “there is a transcendent sweep over our existence” which “humanity has been squandering.” Mark continued: “But in the midst of this mess, I see grace of a new beginning all around me. And within me. I often fail to respond to it. I participate in the madness instead. Whenever in my inner life I do turn to this grace to look for a second chance, I am always granted one. I think I want to spend the rest of my life being a channel of that same goodness to others.” These vague introspective thoughts somehow lead Selmanovic to surmise that though Mark does not believe in Jesus, he

does have a “doctrine of creation, sin, salvation, and new life. That’s Christ, embedded in the life of Mark, present in substance rather than in name.” Then Selmanovic draws the logical conclusion, writing that the stories of the chief and Mark “leave us wondering whether Christ can be more than Christianity. Or even *other than Christianity*.”⁵³

Statements like these suggest that for all their talk about representing a third way which transcends the liberal-conservative divide, Emergents seem to be advocating a postmodern version of modern liberalism. While there are important differences – most Emergents do not deny the existence of a personal and supernatural God⁵⁴ – they make the liberal leap from “doctrine matters less than ethics” to the view that the specific, historic doctrines of the church may not matter at all. Indeed, many of their “new” ideas were already addressed over 80 years ago in J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).

Haven’t We Seen This Before?

Many Emergent authors say that it matters more that we love like Jesus than that we believe in him. At any rate we should not exclude good people from the kingdom just because they do not believe our Christian faith. Machen wrote that the liberals in his day insisted that “Christianity is a life, not a doctrine,” and that conservatives should focus on “the weightier matters of the law” (Christian ethics) rather than use the “trifling matters” of doctrine to divide the church.⁵⁵

Machen responded that doctrines such as Christ’s “vicarious atonement for sin” is not “trifling” and that Christ is not merely “an example for faith” but is “primarily the object of faith.” He explained: “The religion of Paul did not consist in having faith in God *like the faith* which Jesus had in God; it consisted rather in having faith *in Jesus*. ...The plain fact is that imitation of Jesus, important though it was for Paul, was swallowed up by something far more important still. Not the example of Jesus, but the redeeming work of Jesus, was the primary thing for Paul.”⁵⁶

Emergent leaders such as Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, and perhaps Tony Jones believe that people are basically good and free from serious sin. Likewise, Machen observed that the defining belief of modernity was its “supreme confidence in human goodness.” He wrote that “according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.” This absence of sin led Machen to wryly observe that the liberal church “is busily engaged in an absolutely impossible task – she is busily engaged in calling the *righteous* to repentance.” Machen countered that the gospel must begin with sin, for “Without the consciousness of sin, the whole gospel will seem to be an idle tale.”⁵⁷

Many Emergents object to the traditional understanding of the cross: Why does God demand the sacrifice of his innocent Son to satisfy his wrath? Machen noted that modern liberals raised the same issue. He wrote: "Modern liberal teachers...speak with horror of the doctrine of an 'alienated' or an 'angry' God," for this implies that God is "waiting coldly until a price be paid before He grants salvation." Liberals deny that "one person" may "suffer for the sins of another," and "persist in speaking of the sacrifice of Christ as though it were a sacrifice made by some other than God." They insist that a loving God would forgive without penalty.⁵⁸

Machen replied that "the modern rejection of the doctrine of God's wrath proceeds from a light view of sin." He observed: "If sin is so trifling a matter as the liberal Church supposes, then indeed the curse of God's law can be taken very lightly, and God can easily let by-gones be by-gones." But "If a man has once come under a true conviction of sin, he will have little difficulty with the doctrine of the Cross." Machen added that God does not punish someone else for our sin, but "God Himself, and not another, makes the sacrifice for sin.... Salvation is as free *for us* as the air we breathe; God's the dreadful cost, ours the gain."⁵⁹

Emergents seek to break down the walls between Christians and non-Christians and emphasize our common journey with God. Machen agreed that "The Christian man can accept all that the modern liberal means by the brotherhood of man. But the Christian knows also of a relationship far more intimate than that general relationship of man to man, and it is for this more intimate relationship that he reserves the term 'brother.' The true brotherhood, according to Christian teaching, is the brotherhood of the redeemed."⁶⁰

Many Emergents favor a watered down version of inclusivism which extends salvation to those who have not believed in Christ. Machen said that liberals in his day wanted "a salvation which will save all men everywhere, whether they have heard of Jesus or not, and whatever may be the type of life to which they have been reared." He replied that such openness would remove the offense of the gospel and change its historic meaning. He wrote: "What struck the early observers of Christianity most forcibly was not merely that salvation was offered by means of the Christian gospel, but that all other means were resolutely rejected. The early Christian missionaries demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion to Christ. . . . Salvation, in other words, was not merely through Christ, but it was only through Christ."⁶¹

Thus, Machen would probably disagree with those Emergents who suggest that simply being postmodern enables them to transcend the modern liberal-conservative controversy.⁶² Instead, Machen would likely argue that these postmoderns repeat too many of the mistakes of modern liberalism to get very far past it. Their "third way" is too much like the old way to become a new way.

A better way to transcend the liberal-conservative controversy is to incorporate the insights of each. Liberals emphasize ethics and conservatives defend the specific, historic doctrines of the Christian faith. Don't we need both? Is it even possible to have one without the other? The Apostle John writes that God commands us both "to *believe* in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to *love* one another as he commands us" (1 John 3:23). Conservatives must acknowledge with James that *faith without works is dead*, for how can we claim to believe in God if we do not pass on his love and serve our neighbor? (Jam. 2:17-26). And liberals must concede with Paul that *works without faith are vain*. Works without faith give us reason to brag—look what we did—but they are useless in earning any part of our salvation. Paul explains, "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God" (Rom. 4:2).

This essay has been rather hard on Emergent because it has been a critique of their theology, which is Emergent's soft spot. But in our haste to correct their doctrine we must not miss an opportunity to learn and be challenged by their renewed emphasis on social ethics. Emergents rightly remind us that it is not enough to subscribe to orthodox confessions if we are not committed to loving our neighbor, especially the neighbor who is most unlike us. And we remind them that our love for neighbor must be rooted in the doctrines of orthodox Christianity. Best practices can only arise from true beliefs. Genuine Christians never stop serving because they never stop loving, and they never stop loving because they never stop believing.

¹Portions of this essay are excerpted with significant structural changes from my forthcoming book, *Don't Stop Believing: Why Living Like Jesus is not Enough* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

²See David Dunbar, "Missional, Emerging, Emergent: A Traveler's Guide, Part B," *Missional Journal* (June 2008). Online: www.biblical.edu/images/belong/PDFs/vol2no5r.pdf; C. Michael Patton, "Would the Real Emerger Please Stand Up Part 4 Comparing Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Emergers." Online:

www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2008/02/19/will-the-real-emerger-please-stand-up (accessed June 11, 2008).

³George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42-57; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, ed., *The Nature of Confession* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996); John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 28-40; and Roger Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁴Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 131, 140 and *A New Kind of Christian*, ix-x. Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 325-31; Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 38-40 and "Generous Orthodoxy and a Changing World," in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 10-11; and Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

⁵Their writings include: Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001); *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005); *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global*

Crises, and a Revolution of Hope (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); Tony Jones, *The New Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008); Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008); Spencer Burke, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2006); Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak About God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006); *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008); and John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁶This is a fluid environment, and it is worth noting that some who still self-identify with Emergent seem to retain more traditional views than those expressed by these leaders (e.g., Dan Kimball and John Burke).

⁷McLaren, *The Last Word*, 138.

⁸Burke, *A Heretic's Guide*, 202. While this does not prove correlation, it is noteworthy that McLaren wrote an entirely positive foreword to this book.

⁹Burke, *A Heretic's Guide*, 61.

¹⁰Burke, *A Heretic's Guide*, 206.

¹¹øDogmatic Constitution on the Churchö (*Lumen Gentium*), 16, in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 351. See also the discussion of other religions in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §836-48 (Liguori, M.O.: Liguori Publications, 1994), 222-25.

¹²McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 70.

¹³Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 50 (emphasis McLaren's).

¹⁴Burke, *A Heretic's Guide*, 126-27.

¹⁵Samir Selmanovic, øThe Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness,ö in Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 190-91.

¹⁶Isaac Watts, øAt the Crossö (1707; refrain by Ralph E. Hudson, 1885; public domain; emphasis mine).

¹⁷Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 125.

¹⁸Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 124.

¹⁹Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 121, 156, 124.

²⁰Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 137.

²¹Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 121, 166.

²²Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 165.

²³Doug Pagitt, øThe Emerging Church and Embodied Theology,ö in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 128-29. Cf. Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 141-42, where he claims antecedents for his view in Celtic Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy.

²⁴Burke, *A Heretics Guide*, 63.

²⁵Burke, *A Heretics Guide*, 64.

²⁶Jones, *The New Christians*, 78.

²⁷Jones, *The New Christians*, 77.

²⁸Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 121, 136.

²⁹Jones, *The New Christians*, 78. Jones's interpretation of this metaphor is surprisingly literal. He misses that the chasm between two cliffs is a physical picture illustrating a spiritual truth rather than a literal statement depicting sin as a matter of distance.

³⁰Jones, *The New Christians*, 78. Jones's comments occur within a story in which he denies the necessity of penal substitution (p. 76-79) and adds that øWhat happened, economically speakingö what was the cosmic transaction on Good Fridayö is a subject to be bandied about in theological circles until the end of time.ö Regardless of how the cross saves, Jones insists that øthe crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the impetus for healed and healing relationships in a world that desperately needs themö (p. 78-79). I wonder how Jones can be sure that the cross will heal our social relationships if he does not know how it cleanses us from personal sin.

³¹Brian McLaren made this point in his lecture at øEmergent Conversations: Present and Future, Challenges and Potential,ö at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary's øTalking Pointsö (Fall, 2005). Online: grts.cornerstone.edu/media/chapel/2005-09-12-Brian%20McLaren-Talking%20Points%20Session%204.mp3.

³²Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 102. Although he is not properly Emergent, Steve Chalke has the most famous quote regarding ødivine child abuseö that is bandied about in Emergent circles. See Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-83. Elsewhere Chalke states that øThe theological problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and foremost concerned with retribution flowing from his wrath against sinners.ö He adds: øOn the cross Jesus does not placate God's anger in taking the punishment for sin, but rather absorbs its consequences and, in his resurrection, defeats death.ö See Steve

Chalke, "Cross Purposes," *Christianity* (September 2004). Online: www.christianitymagazine.co.uk/engine.cfm?i=92&id=22&arch=1.

N.T. Wright suggests that Chalke did not mean to disparage all forms of penal substitution but only the models that depict God as a vengeful Father who vents his wrath on his innocent Son. However, since penal substitution historically insists that God has wrath which needs satisfied (though this does not necessarily make him vengeful), it seems that Chalke does have issues with penal substitution as traditionally understood. See N.T. Wright, "The Cross and the Caricatures," (Eastertide, 2007), 9. Online: www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=205.

³³ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 80.

³⁴ McLaren, *The Last Word*, 40.

³⁵ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 22.

³⁶ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 7-8, 17.

³⁷ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 17, 42.

³⁸ McLaren, *The Last Word*, 77.

³⁹ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 131.

⁴⁰ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 3, 66.

⁴¹ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 56.

⁴² Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 133.

⁴³ Peter J. Walker and Tyler Clark, "Missing the Point: The Absolute Truth Behind Postmodernism, Emergent and the Emerging Church," *Relevant Magazine* (July/August 2006), 72.

⁴⁴ LeRon Shults, "Doctrinal Statement," email from *Emergent*, May 4, 2006. More examples of valuing behavior over belief are found in Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 43-44, 56, 101-6, and 191-96.

⁴⁵ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 53-54.

⁴⁶ Peter Rollins, as quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 132.

⁴⁷ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 109-10 (first emphasis his, second emphasis mine).

⁴⁸ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: Word, 2006), 163.

⁴⁹ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 247 (emphasis his).

⁵⁰ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 167 (emphasis his).

⁵¹ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 216-17 (italics McLaren's, boldface mine).

⁵² Cf. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 264. Here McLaren appeals to the "C1-C6 Spectrum" controversy in missions, in which missiologists debate whether and to what extent people must forsake their non-Christian religions to follow Jesus. As is his custom, McLaren avoids giving a direct answer to this question, but he seems to favor the "not very much" side. He provocatively writes: "In this light, although I don't hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus. Ultimately, I hope that Jesus will save Buddhism, Islam, and every other religion, including the Christian religion, which often seems to need saving about as much as any other religion does."

⁵³ Selmanovic, "The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, 190-92 (emphasis mine). For other authors who suggest, to a lesser degree, that it matters more that we live like Jesus than that we believe in him, see p. 43-45, 56, and 100-02.

⁵⁴ Spencer Burke would be an example of one who does, for he professes to be a panentheist. See Burke, *A Heretic's Guide*, 195.

⁵⁵ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 19, 160.

⁵⁶ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 160, 81 (first emphasis is mine, second is Machen's).

⁵⁷ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 64, 66, 68 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁸ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 125, 129-32.

⁵⁹ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 129, 131, 132 (emphasis his).

⁶⁰ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 157-58.

⁶¹ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 122-23.

⁶² Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming*, 12: "Postconservatives emphatically do not consider themselves part of an 'evangelical left.' To them, 'left' and 'right' in theology are both defined by the Enlightenment and modernity, which are increasingly being challenged and marginalized by postmodernity." See also John Franke, "Generous Orthodoxy and a Changing World," in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 11.