

Assessing the Emerging Church

I'd like to welcome you tonight. We're going to do a little something special; something out of the norm for us. I'm not sure how it's going to turn out because I have a lot of notes here. This is only supposed to be one sermon, but we're going to get going.

I've been asked a number of times about the emerging church. It seems the emerging church is all the rage today. Virtually all the new church start-ups that I know of are more often than not "emerging." I haven't said much about the emergent church. I haven't critiqued it much, even in private. And frankly I've been reluctant to spend a great deal of time on it, researching it and looking into it. And one of the reasons why I've been reluctant to do so is because it's a trend. And frankly I am so tired of trends in Christianity. I'm so tired of fad Christianity. I'm tired of the prayer of Jabez. I'm tired of the "what would Jesus do." I'm tired of the Left Behind series that everybody's gobbling up. I'm tired of these kind of fads that just run a muck in the church. I'm tired of the fad of the seeker sensitive movement that is dying its own death. It is slowly dying, and I am convinced that the emergent church is nothing more than a fad. Now I know in saying that I'm going to make a lot of people mad, but the fact is in two or three decades there will not be an emerging church. It will be something different. But it has become so prevalent that I think commenting on it and critiquing it is very important.

One of the problems about critiquing or talking about the emergent church is that it is an incredibly difficult thing to pin down on what they actually believe and what they're actually doing. It's like Jello. You push it here and it just moves all over the place. Very difficult to pin down and to critique. One person said, "The emergent churches are so disparate, so different, there are exceptions to every generalization. Most are too new and too fluid to clarify, let alone assess, their significance." And I find that to be absolutely true. So if you have a friend that's dabbling in the emergent church and you hear this message and you say, "oh, you need to hear this message on the emergent church," and they'll listen to this message, they'll probably say something like, "well, that's not what we do." It's just – everything's different. There is no authority. D.A. Carson wrote a critique, a book entitled, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church. And I would say it was a very charitable critique. Very lovingly done, and very complimentary on a number of issues and yet he was criticized thoroughly for being overly simple and making too many generalizations, and the very accusation of, "Well, that's not really what we're about." So it's very difficult.

My struggle in studying on this is that there are a number of people that are talking about the emergent church and even critiquing the church, the emerging movement, but my frustration is it seems that far too many of them are entirely too generous. They are entirely too kind and it seems that there are very few that are standing up and exposing error the way it needs to be exposed. And there is clearly error in the emerging church movement. Now I cannot speak for the movement as a whole because they're not like the Southern Baptist, "This is what we believe." But we can take the leaders of the emerging church. These are the people that are leading these groups, inspiring these people, and take their words and what they're saying and critique that. And when you go to the top and hear what they're saying, there is much to call out and to expose of what's going on in this movement.

There are a number of unique things that I think have come together to make the emerging church what it is. It is a mixture of post-modernism, New Age spirituality, liberal theology and universalism, and environmentalism. You take all those things, you mix it up and you're going to have a pretty good understanding of what the emerging church is all about - post-modernism, New Age spirituality, liberal theology, and environmentalism.

I want to begin this evening by discussing some of these elements and how they play out. And I'm going to begin with post-modernism because I really don't think you can understand the emerging church until you understand what post-modernism is. It, too, is a very fluid thing. One person will offer this definition and say, "Well, that's not it," and they'll offer another definition. And that is really a hallmark of post-modernism – truth can't be known. It's just all over the place.

Post-modernism. Sociologists examine thinking patterns of generations and they name them, come up with names. In the mid-90's, a period of modernity came to an end. Some said when the Berlin Wall fell, that marked the end of the age of modernity. The age of modernism was characterized by the fact that truth exists, but really only the scientific method is the only reliable way to determine truth. And the age of modernity brought its own special challenges to the church, because as you know, faith cannot be proved by scientific method. And so the age of modernity brought its own challenges to the church. Liberalism, of course, began to run a muck as they tried to reconcile Genesis 1 and 2 with the science of evolution. You see they tried to bring it together. "This has to be empirical; we have to have scientific fact and evolution is a scientific fact. The Bible says God created... so how do we make this work?" But truth can be known and truth did exist; it just had to be proven, determined, by some scientific method.

Post-modernism, post-modernity generally dismisses the possibility of knowing truth. You really can't know for certain something is true or not. It is the age of individual truth. It is the age of, "Well, that's true for you, but this is true for me." They look at truth as a reality based on one person's perspective or interpretation. And as such, because people look at reality different, there's all kinds of different truths. Let me give you an example – the Iraq war. If you're an American imperialist, you look at the Iraq war and say, "There was the liberation of Iraq." And we would write history books about the liberation of Iraq. But if you're Saddam Hussein and you look at the Iraq war, you are looking at the aggression of a nation on your sovereign country, and you would write history totally different. So post-modernism says, "That's the whole reality of all truth. It's all one person's perspective."

The hallmark of the emerging church is bringing in these post-modern thinking patterns into the Christian faith. And when that happens, you have a train wreck on its way. Post-modernism and the emerging church doesn't like to talk about doctrine. Doctrine is problematic because doctrine is propositional truth. But you see in the post-modern mind, that's only your take of the truth. My take of the truth may be different, so there really is no propositional truth. And so what you will hear in the emerging church, you will not hear sermons that espouse propositional truth. They don't even talk about doctrine; they have a different word. They use the word "conversation." We converse with each other, and as we converse with other people and other religions we can learn their side of the truth. So we don't have doctrine. That's why if you go to a website of some of the emerging church, they're not probably going to have a "What do you believe" section, because that's not important to an emerging church. It's not about doctrine.

It is hard to pin down exactly what they do believe, but there are a number of spokesmen. I don't know that they'd want to be called leaders of the emerging church, but there are a number of spokesmen that I will be referring to. Probably the most articulate spokesman of the emerging church is Brian McLaren. He wrote a book that would probably be his manifesto of the emerging church. And the name of his book is called, entitled, A Generous Orthodoxy. That's a very interesting title, a generous orthodoxy. Obviously the word "orthodoxy" is the standard of what is true. Brian McLaren, being the post-modern, the emerging church, wants to talk about a generous standard, a generous orthodoxy. He writes, "A generous orthodoxy, in contrast to the tense, narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, a generous orthodoxy doesn't take itself too seriously. It is humble. It doesn't claim too much. It doesn't consider orthodoxy the exclusive domain of theologians alone, but like Chesterton, welcomes the poets, the mystics, and even those who choose to say very little or to remain silent, including the disillusioned and the doubters. Their silence speaks eloquently of the majesty of God that goes beyond all human articulation. And what you find in the emerging church is a new brand of ecumenicalism, where they search out for the

truth of all. Doubtters and skeptics and atheists and Hindus – they seek for the truth. So it's not restricted to theologians. To argue about what is true or false according to the emerging church would be a relic of a bygone age. We don't argue about what is true, but we converse with everyone and learn from each and every aspect."

McLaren speaks about the emerging church and he uses the example of the rings of a tree. You know if you cut down a tree and you have the little concentric circles and they begin to grow larger and larger and larger. He describes the emerging church as these rings embracing more and more truth as it is being revealed through various religions and various avenues. He writes, "The meaning of emergence as used in these and other settings is an essential part of the ecosystem of generous orthodoxy. A simple diagram can illustrate what we mean by emergent thinking. Each ring of the tree represents not a replacement of the previous rings, not a rejection of them, but an embracing of them, a comprising of them and an inclusion of them in something bigger. Likewise some thought seeks to embrace what has become before, like a new ring on a tree in something bigger. This is emergent, or integral, or integrative thinking. Emerging thinking has been an unspoken assumption behind all my previous books." He's basically saying, "I'm just gathering truth from all areas of this great, beautiful world – from creation, from Catholics." He said, "This God-given thirst for emergence is causing new forms of Christian spirituality, community and mission (they're big on 'mission') to emerge from modern western Christianity." He writes, "A generous orthodoxy is an emerging orthodoxy never complete until we arrive at our final home in God."

Statements of faith, confessions – that's a thing of the past. Orthodoxy is growing. We're embracing more and more truth. It's interesting to me, Jesus said something in His prayer in John 17:17 He said, "Sanctify them in truth; Thy word is truth." You know they really struggle with Christian doctrine. They embrace, it seems, everything but biblical doctrine. Biblical doctrine is the only thing that they really reject. But Jesus Himself was very much aware of post-modern thinking. It's not new. I think they struggled with it in the Roman world. Remember when Jesus stood before Pilate – what did He say? Jesus said, "I've come to testify of the truth." And Pilate said, "What is truth? How can you know truth?" Pilate had people lying to him all day long. He couldn't believe anybody. Just like post-modernism that says, "You can't read history books and expect to believe it's true. It's just their perspective. There is no truth." Jesus says, "My word is true." You see, post-modern age gives the church incredible opportunities for ministry. In a world that is so battered by lies and deceptions and doubts – they don't know what's true – we can stand up and say, "We have the truth." You may reject it, but we have it.

Jim sang, and I don't know – I knew Jim knew what I was going to be preaching about, but for him to sing the song that he wrote about “Contend for the Faith” – just about made me weak in the knees. Brian McLaren says that, “Emergent orthodoxy is never complete until we arrive at our final home in God.” Jude says in verse 3, “Contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” Contend for the faith.

In his book, A Generous Orthodoxy, the sub-title of his book is, “Why I am Missional and Evangelical and Post/Protestant and Liberal and Conservative and Mystical, Poetic, Biblical and Charismatic, Contemplative and Fundamentalist, Calvinist Anabaptist, Anglican and Methodist and Catholic and Green and Incarnational and Depressed-yet-Hopeful and Emergent and Unfinished Christian.” That’s Brian McLaren. “I’m a Methodist, I’m a Catholic, I’m green, I’m a fundamentalist, I’m a Calvinist. I’ve embraced truth from all them.” Brian McLaren says he knows of seven Jesus’s. Not that he knows seven different Jesus’s, but he has been presented through various different systems seven different Jesus’s. So you get to choose, I guess, which Jesus you want, or you blend them all together. I don’t know.

This rejection of knowable truth is nothing less than relativism. And relativism itself is contradictory because it is an absolute statement about something. Everything is relative. But it is interesting when you look at the emergent church and what the leaders of the emerging church are saying, everything is relevant until you come to Biblical doctrine – then they are absolutely sure that it cannot be known or it is not true.

I’m going to have you listen here in a minute to a clip from Doug Pagitt. He is an emerging church “pastor.” And I say that with all seriousness he is a “pastor” (in quotes) and the name of his church is Solomon’s Porch “Church” (in quotes) because I do not believe he’s a pastor and I do not believe that it is a church. Doug Pagitt is a “pastor” and you are going to hear in this clip he was invited to be interviewed on The Way of the Master Radio, which is a radio program by Todd Friel, Kirk Cameron, and Ray Comfort. And they interviewed Doug Pagitt and they asked him some very simple questions about hell and different things, and you’re going to notice a couple of thing – I want you to listen. The evasiveness and the assertion that these are issues that are just unknowable; we don’t know these issues and they’re not way-out-there theological issues. They are basic theological issues. So you will hear this. I’m going to ask Jeremy to go ahead, but ultimately you are going to hear Doug Pagitt deny the reality of hell and affirm universalism – that all people go to heaven.

Interviewer – Do you think that there’s an eternal damnation for people who are not Christians?

Pagitt – Yeah, well I think that there's all kinds of, I think that damnation would sort of be that there's parts of life and creation that seem to be counter to what God is doing, and those are the things that are eliminated and removed and done away with. And so I think that that's what damnation is. And so there's people who want to live out that kind of, who want to have that good judgment; the judgment of God in their life.

Interviewer – Doug, hold on a second. I have no idea what you just said. Here's what I think hell is – eternal damnation. God sends lawbreakers to a place where there's weeping, there's gnashing of teeth, a lake of sulfur, the worm never dies, eternal conscious torment. Agree or disagree?

Pagitt – Disagree.

Interviewer – What do you think hell is?

Pagitt – I think hell is disconnection and disintegration with God.

Interviewer – I agree with that also.

Pagitt – I have no idea what you mean with those – those sound much more like metaphors than they do with like actuality. But I don't know.

Interviewer – Well, those are the words that Jesus used to describe hell.

Pagitt – Oh, I know. Oh yeah, I know. But Jesus didn't use them in a string like that, so you just pulled a bunch of words of Jesus and just strung them together in your own way.

Interviewer – It's called Systematic Theology. Doug, I'm a good Buddhist. Where do I go when I die?

Pagitt – You know this is not an interesting conversation. Is this what we're going to do? You're going to put together false little dichotomies and ask me to answer in one sentence and then interrupt my answers?

Interviewer – Well, I don't know what's hard about the question. I'm a good Buddhist. Where do I go when I die?

Pagitt – Well you probably go to the funeral home, but depending on where you're being born, if that's what you're talking about.

Interviewer – No pastor. I'm a good Buddhist. Where do I go when I die?

Pagitt – Ok, this is just not an interesting or helpful conversation for me to be a part of. So if that's what we're doing in this conversation, then it's – cause what you're asking in this kind of question has to do with a place. Are you suggesting to me that heaven is actually a place? When you say, "Where do I go," you're suggesting to me that the reign of God, that the place of God is an individual place that you go? Is that what you're suggesting?

Interviewer – Yes, sir.

Pagitt – Where, where is that place?

Interviewer – It's called heaven.

Pagitt – Where is it?

Interviewer – We don't know where it is exactly right now.

Pagitt – Then why would you ask a question, "Where do I go?"

Interviewer – Just because I don't know where it is, doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Pagitt – Then why did you ask, "Where?"

Interviewer – This is no-brainer land, sir.

Pagitt – It is not no-brainer land, it's a non sequitur.

Interviewer – I'm a good Muslim. Where do you think I go pastor?

Pagitt – Where do I go? See, here we go again. Now you're talking about a place.

Interviewer – What happens to my soul when I die?

Pagitt – Now there's a different question.

Interviewer – All right. What happens to my soul when I die?

Pagitt – I'm not just ... you're the guy who wants to be precise about words, that's why you put sentences together like that.

Interviewer – Don't you?

Pagitt – Yes, very much. That's why when you put together questions like that, ask and they don't make any sense.

Interviewer – Ok, I'm a good Muslim. What happens to my soul when I die?

Pagitt – You interact with God just as every other human being interacts with God.

Interviewer – You mean Hebrews 9, "It is appointed unto man once to die and then judgment?"

Pagitt – Yeah, right.

Interviewer – So he gets judged.

Pagitt – Right. It's interaction with God.

Interviewer – And so what's going to happen to the – how is God going to judge the good Muslim?

Pagitt – God's going to judge the life, and repair and restore and give life of everybody in the same way.

Interviewer – So the Muslim is ultimately not going to go to a bad place, he’s ultimately going to be restored with God when he dies?

Pagitt – No, there’s going to be no difference between the way God’s going to interact with you when you die and the way God’s going to interact with the Muslim when the Muslim dies.

Interviewer – I want to put this in my fundamentalist language. What I just heard you say is, there’s no difference between the Christian and the Muslim after-life. God is going to have a good place prepared for both of us.

Pagitt – No, I didn’t say a place. There you go again. What I said was, the way God’s going to interact with you is the same way that God’s going to interact with everybody. The same experience of all of humanity, God will interact with all of humanity in judgment the same no matter who you are, or what your parents have taught you, or what you believe. Now, how a person’s life translates into the evermore, that’s something that for one to sit on a telephone conversation and say about non-existent/actual person Muslim as compared to Todd, for me to suggest that I’m going to tell you how God is going to interact with that individual person. What the result of that is going to be is not at all within the bounds of historic Christianity.

All right, it’s a pastor, a leading pastor of the emerging church. Now this rejection of doctrine, know-ability of God and of truth, has led them to embrace a new age kind of spirituality with all kinds of mystic overtones. If you were to go to an emerging church, it’s not going to be the preaching and the proclaiming of propositional truth. It will be very much an experience-oriented service where you will be introduced to the unknowable, to the mystery. A couple of other leading authors and speakers and pastors of the emerging church have written.

“Mystery” is a big thing to the emerging church, because of course nothing can be known, so they want to talk about mystery. Donald Miller in his book, and it sold a million copies and is being read by seminarians, just eating this up, it’s called, Blue Like Jazz. He wrote, “I don’t think you can explain how Christian faith works either. It’s a mystery. And I love this about Christian spirituality. It cannot be explained. And yet it’s beautiful and it’s true. It’s something you feel, and it comes from the soul.” He went on to say in his book, Blue Like Jazz, “For me the beginning of sharing my faith with people began with throwing out Christianity and embracing Christian spirituality – a non-political, mysterious system that can be experienced, but not explained. Christianity, unlike Christian spirituality, was not a term that excited me, and I could not in good

conscience tell a friend about a faith that didn't excite me. I couldn't share something I wasn't experiencing."

Rob Bell in his book, and they have great names for churches and great names for books, his book is entitled, Velvet Elvis. And he wrote, "The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It's about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails; and if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not. The mystery is the truth." Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis.

I have a first-hand account of a pastor whose name was Jeff Whitaker. He went to an emerging church conference. This was very recent, May '08. It was a conference that was held in Goshen, Indiana at Goshen College. The name of the conference was "Everything Must Change," and it was led by one of the emerging leaders, Brian McLaren. Let me just share with you his first-hand experience with this conference with these leaders of the emerging church. "I sat through session after session listening to the emergent gospel, complete with medieval chants and choruses of despair, apologies to the native American Indians of the Saint Joseph River Valley, as well as to Mother Earth for scarring her through our mining and oil drilling operations. Upon arriving at Goshen College on Friday night, May 9th of 2008, I immediately went to the registration table to pick up my name tag, along with other conference materials. I was handed a plain, cloth tote bag containing sample publications from organizations such as The Sierra Club, The ONE Campaign, Emergent Village, etc. And as I came to the end of the table I was also given a complementary green, low energy light bulb. I knew at that moment that I was about to begin a very unique experience, to say the least.

"The first session of the evening was entitled, 'Focusing on the wounds of our planet.' We sang a song based on St. Francis of Assisi's poem, 'Brother Sun, Sister Moon,' and were then lead in an opening prayer of location and repentance by a young African American woman. The music was all original and was performed by very gifted young women. The tonality was modal and in arrhythmic (reminiscent of the coffee house styles of the 1960's, a sort of Hillsong meets Joan Baez blend, very prosaic in nature, with quickly spoken recitations over guitar and violins; 7 or 8 words every 2 or 3 beats), all crying out about our rape of mother earth, and other human rights violations. The thing that stuck out to me was that there was no worship poetry extolling the glory of God or the beauty of Christ in creation. Everything was directed towards an inward, subjective, and very mystical experience, coupled with a world-view which represented more of the gospel of Marx, than of the gospel of Mark.

“The emergent community’s fixation with non-biblical practices rooted in the middle ages has been responsible for leading many sincere pilgrims to explore the ancient modern church through candles, incense, adoration of icons, and relics. The audience was repeatedly encouraged to cast off their old ‘framing story,’ the way they see the world, including such bad things as doctrinal and systematic Bible study since, according to emergent thought, nothing can be definitely known. The conclusion of the Friday evening session was an amazing demonstration of this philosophy. The audience was directed to many different sacred spaces set up to aid them in getting in touch with themselves and the Divine. One station was a table covered with votive candles which could be lit and meditated upon. Another held a large bowl of water where one could get in touch with the flow of nature and spirit. And yet another featured a bowl of dirt where one could literally touch mother earth and contemplate all the evils done to her.” He wrote, “I got in touch with my car, drove home, burning precious fossil fuel, and finally got in touch with my bed.”

There is a huge emphasis in the emergent church on social activism and environmentalism, but it’s not accidental. They speak about being “missional” and they are very missional, and a lot of those that critique the church, the emerging church, will speak about the things that they do; feeding the hungry, housing the poor, doing great things for people, the poor. But it is a very deliberate part of their religion. It is part and parcel of their religion which brings us really to the most critical problem. So they’re part of the post-modern thought, that nothing can be known, they have a very free worship spirituality, getting in touch with the Divine, but it really comes down to the most critical problem facing the emerging church and that is that the gospel that is presented in the emerging church. It is not a gospel that deals with the issue of personal redemption from sin. That’s not the burden of the emerging church. They are not trying to save people from their sins. They’ve already said they don’t believe in hell. They believe in universalism. They believe we are all going to get there anyway. Their focus is on the here and on the now, and as such, their gospel is a social gospel. It is about relieving poverty. It is about doing good. It is about feeding the poor and clothing the poor and ending social injustice, and cleaning up mother earth, and protecting mother earth. There is no personal salvation. There is only a planetary salvation.

Bob DeWaay in his “Critical Issues Commentary” wrote, “So for McLaren (and I would add the other emerging church leaders), their mission is to save the world in a social and environmental sense, not to rescue lost sinners from a lost and dying world that God is going to destroy in judgment. When McLaren says, ‘God creates the church as a missional community to join Him in His mission of saving the world,’ that is what McLaren has in mind. Not when we talk about preaching the gospel to save lost souls, but in redeeming the earth and saving oppressed people. McLaren writes of this gospel, ‘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 wild flowers, so their industry should respect, not rape, the environment. 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.’ They truly have an eschatology of post-millennialism that has run a muck.”

Emerging church leaders do not believe in hell. Again, I’m saying leaders. There may be churches that differ. But the leaders of the movement do not believe in hell. They believe, as you heard Doug speak about, “All will stand before God and they’ll all be judged alike.” You see, the burden of the emerging church is not the salvation of the lost or the proclamation of the gospel. The message is about the “now,” the life now. It is a social gospel. And as it gets into their discussions on the gospel itself, you will see where they are fundamentally wrong. Brian McLaren wrote, “Perhaps our inward turned, individual, salvation-oriented, unadapted Christianity is a colossal and tragic misunderstanding. Perhaps we need to listen again for the true song of salvation, which is good news to all creation. So perhaps it’s best to suspend what, if anything, you ‘know’ about what it means to call Jesus Savior, and to give the matter of salvation some fresh attention. Let’s start simply. In the Bible ‘saved’ means rescue or heal. It emphatically does not mean saved from hell.” Isn’t it amazing that a person that doesn’t believe you can make such absolute statements, makes these absolute statements? “It emphatically does not mean saved from hell or give eternal life after death, as many preachers seem to imply in sermon after sermon. Rather, its meaning varies from passage to passage. But in general, in any context ‘saved’ means, ‘Get out of trouble.’ The trouble could be sickness, war, political intrigue, oppression, poverty, imprisonment, or any kind of danger or evil.”

It’s interesting; he didn’t say anything about sin. He didn’t speak anything about being saved from sin.

I heard Brian McLaren speak with my own ears, with his own lips – I was going to say a sermon, but he probably wouldn’t call it a sermon. It was a message. And he was speaking about the gospel and about hell, and I quote, “A lot of arguments happen among religious and non-religious people about the question of who is going to hell and who is going to heaven. And a lot of times Christians get into this argument by saying, ‘We have the only way to heaven.’ And people often ask me, what do I think is the way to heaven. I have a problem when they ask me this question because it assumes the primary purpose of Jesus’ coming, and the primary message of Jesus was the message about how to get to heaven.”

I'm going to play a very short clip, just two minutes. This is Brian McLaren speaking again about an attack on not only hell, but you will hear him critique substitutionary, penal substitution, the atonement where Christ died for our sins. That is, God put the wrath that was deserving us, put it on Christ. Listen to what Brian McLaren has to say about that.

McLaren – This is one of the huge problems with the traditional understanding of hell. Because if the cross is in line with Jesus' teaching, and I want to say the only, and I certainly want to say even the primary, but a primary meaning of the cross, is that the kingdom of God doesn't come like the kings of this world by inflicting violence and coercing people, but that the kingdom of God comes through suffering and involuntary sacrifice, right? But in an ironic way the doctrine of hell basically says, no, but that's not really true. Again, God gets His way through coercion and violence and intimidation and domination, just like every other kingdom does. The cross isn't the center then. The cross is almost a distraction and false advertising for God.

Interviewer – Oh Brian, that was so beautifully said. I was tempted to get on my soapbox there and, you know, because as you and I know there are so many illustrations and examples you can give that show why the traditional view of hell completely falls in the face of – it's just antithetical to the cross. But the way you put it there, I love that. I mean it's false advertising. And here Jesus is saying, "turn the other cheek," "love your enemy," "forgive seven times seventy," "return violence with self-sacrificial love," but if we believe the traditional view of hell it's like, well you got for a short amount of time, cause eventually God is going to get them.

McLaren – Yeah, and I heard one well-known Christian leader who I won't mention his name just to protect his reputation because some people will use this against him, but I heard him say it like this: The traditional understanding says that God asks of us something God isn't capable of Himself. God asks us to forgive people, but God isn't capable of forgiving. God can't forgive unless He punishes somebody in the place of the person He's going to forgive. God doesn't say to you "forgive your wife and then go kick the dog to vent your anger." God actually forgives. There's a certain sense that a common understanding of the atonement presents a God who is incapable of forgiving unless He kicks somebody else.

The book that McLaren himself has endorsed written by Alan Jones, an author of the emerging church, wrote a book called Reimagining Christianity - Reconnect Your Spirit Without Disconnecting Your Mind. In this book Alan Jones says, "The churches fixation on the death of Jesus as a universal saving act must end;

and the place of the cross must be reimagined in Christian faith. Why? Because of the cult of suffering and the vindictive God behind it.” Jones goes on to say, “Penal substitution was the name of this vile doctrine.” This is a total repudiation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that’s why people need to stand up and expose this for what this is, and start calling a spade a spade.

A couple of weeks ago I was watching, and I shared this in one of the services, I was watching the news and I saw a video clip of a church in which the pastor was one of the pastors that was provoking the IRS by endorsing a presidential candidate during the season. The thing that struck me about this was not anything that the preacher said; it just went in one ear and out the other. But what grabbed my attention was the pitiful sight that I saw as they were shooting footage of this pastor preaching on Sunday morning, violating the IRS order. Here’s an old man in a suit and tie, and as it pans across the audience, the church was virtually empty. It was at least 80%, if not 90% empty, and the 10 or 15% that were there looked bored out of their minds. I want you to know something, that is exactly the image that the emerging church is reacting to and against – a dead church, which has been the case, and in that I agree with the emerging church. The church is and has been, by and large, in the United States dead; spiritually inactive and you have shallow pulpits and just ridiculous stuff coming out of the pulpits and churches are dying.

That has been going on for a long time, and to fix that one group started what we know as the seeker sensitive movement. “The church is dying; we’ve got to get people back in the church, and so we thought they’re bored with the old message and so we’ll entertain them.” And so for the last two or three decades we’ve had the seeker sensitive movement. Well the seeker sensitive movement is dying. It is dying a slow death, and before long it will be passé. But what is emerging now is the emerging church. And they are doing what the seeker sensitive movement has failed to do because the seeker sensitive movement has been shallow, there’s been no substance, and people are wanting meaning and substance and the emerging church is offering it. They are not offering it in doctrine and in truth and in power. They are offering it in mysticism and experience and spirituality. At least you feel like you’re getting something special.

Well I was reading a very interesting book by D.A. Carson, and he spoke about I think a very relevant progression that we see in modern evangelicalism today. In his book, The Cross and Christian Ministry, D.A. Carson looked at several movements throughout history and he noticed a pattern. There is a generation that comes along that embraces and believes the gospel. And that generation acts upon their belief in the gospel, but then the next generation comes along and they really just assume the gospel. It’s not that they deny it, they just assume the gospel, “Yeah, that’s true,” and they go one doing their thing. There is a third generation that comes along and virtually forgets the gospel. It’s not that they deny it, it’s not a big part of

their life, and I would say the seeker sensitive movement is in that. They've kind of just forgotten the gospel. If you were to press seeker sensitive pastors and churches, they would not deny the gospel, they would not deny Christian doctrine, they would just say that there's better ways to reach the lost. But then D.A. Carson says there is this fourth generation that actually abandons the gospel. And that is where you find the emerging church. They have abandoned the gospel and Christian doctrine, the gospel that was once held dear a few generations ago.

Let me just give you some concluding remarks here. I find it very interesting in the book of Acts when Paul comes there to Mars Hill, to the pagan philosophers who have envisioned every possible god that they could possibly envision. They have space for the unknown god; the god that can't be known – the mystery. It is so interesting to me that Paul comes to them and he says, "This God that is unknown, I proclaim to you." He's revealed Himself. You can know Him. You can know propositional things about Him, and Paul declared to them who God is. God has spoken. God has made Himself known through Hebrews 1, "Long ago and at many times and many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son." Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except by Me."

Secondly, I think it's very interesting that for Paul the problem of humanity wasn't the knowability of God. That wasn't the problem – that God has somehow kept Himself hidden and we really can't know anything about God. Paul says in Romans 1:19, "For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them." But the problem is, "although they knew God, they refused to acknowledge Him as God." That's the problem with humanity. The problem with humanity is sin, and contrary to McLaren and company, Jesus had a very clear purpose for coming. You know what's so amazing to me about the ministry of Jesus and about the ministry of the apostles? They never were involved in any social or political activism whatsoever. None. And when Jesus fed the multitudes, He was very careful to expose when they were just there for the bread. They cut it off. Just there for the miracles. Jesus never once was involved in these social, political activism. Jesus made it very clear His purpose for coming. He says in Luke 19:10, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost." And He also makes it very clear in John 3:36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Furthermore, Paul says something quite amazing to me about the church and its purpose. The missional statement of the church is not social activism or environmentalism. Paul says in I Timothy 3:15 the church is

the “pillar and support of the truth.” Isn’t that amazing? In a lost and dying world that doesn’t know the truth, doesn’t know who to believe, the church is the pillar and the support of the truth.

Fifthly and finally, the gospel that McLaren and company deny and pervert and change, the gospel is the means, the only means, that a man can be reconciled to God. Do you remember what Paul said in Romans 1:16? “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Do you get those words? He was living in a day and age when the gospel was under attack, when people were embarrassed about the gospel, when the gospel was passé, Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to salvation.” May Faith Community Church never be ashamed of the gospel. May we never shrink away to find a better way to reconcile men to God, or to change the message. May we hold the truth of the gospel high. Paul says that he was determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

There’s a lot of sincerity in the emerging church; a lot of sincere people. Many of them are sincerely wrong. But it does no good for us just to point out the errors of the emerging church. If we’re not careful, if we’re not diligent, we could be the dead church that they’re protesting. More than ever it is my desire that we will see the gospel, to see its power present in changing people’s lives. I’ve just visited with a young man tonight who said, “Pastor, God saved me. He’s changed my attitudes. He’s changed my heart. He’s taken things away from me that I could never let go of.” That is the power of the gospel. And I’m telling you, where that is present, a church will be alive. I pray that we will understand and keep close to our heart what the church is about. It is the pillar and support of the truth. Paul said to Timothy, “Preach the word in season and out of season.” It doesn’t matter if the church is successful or not, it only matters if a church is faithful. And I trust we will be faithful. I trust that we will not be anemic in our relationships; that we will not look at church as just coming and hearing a sermon and going out. But why is it that the heretics have to put us to shame in ministering to the lost world? Let’s continue or, redouble our efforts to live out our Christian faith with one another, and in the life and in the communities that we live. They are reaction, unfortunately, they are a wrong reaction. They are a fad. And fortunately in a few decades they’ll fade away. Unfortunately there will be another fad just around the corner. Will we stay true to the word of God? That’s the question. Let’s pray,

Father, I pray that tonight would have been beneficial for us to know the attacks that are being made upon the gospel, the issues that are at stake. I pray that we will cherish and hold tightly the gospel, that we will continue with all of our might and with our resources to send men and women into the world from Kansas City to Thailand to Morocco to the ends of the earth to make Christ known in the gospel. If all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and all will be judged alike, missions is the most ridiculous thing in all the

world. Why do it? Why waste the money? Why waste the people? The lives, why risk them? But it is the means that You have ordained in gathering Your people, and I pray that Faith Community Church will redouble our efforts in this matter, that we will make Jesus Christ known among the nations. We pray this and ask for Your blessing upon it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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