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“A Generous Orthodoxy” –Is It Orthodox?

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McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church near Baltimore, and he has become a leading figure—if not the single most influential figure—in what is now known as the “Emergent” church. In A Generous Orthodoxy, he offers what amounts to a manifesto for the Emergent movement, even as he claims to have established a position that combines the strengths of both liberalism and evangelicalism, the charismatic and the contemplative, the mystical and the poetic.

McLaren defines orthodoxy as “straight thinking” or “right opinion.” He sets the mood of his book right at the start: “The last thing I want is to get into nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right (meaning approaching or achieving timeless technical perfection).” Still following?

Since he is determined to transcend all those difficult questions of who is right and who is wrong, McLaren wants to qualify his brand of orthodoxy as “generous orthodoxy.” He credits the term to Dr. Stanley Grenz, a prominent revisionist evangelical theologian who, in his book *Renewing the Center*, quotes the late Yale theologian Hans Frei as the inventor of the phrase.

McLaren intends to be provocative, explaining that this reflects his “belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity.”

McLaren is also honest about the fact that he lacks any formal theological education. As a matter of fact, he seems rather proud of this fact, insinuating that formal theological education is likely to trap persons in a habit of trying to determine right belief.

This author's purpose is transparent and consistent. Embracing the worldview of the postmodern age, he embraces relativism at the cost of clarity in matters of truth and intends to redefine Christianity for this new age, largely in terms of an eccentric mixture of elements he would take from virtually every theological position and variant.

He claims to uphold “consistently, unequivocally, and unapologetically” the historic creeds of the church, specifically the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. At the same time, however, he denies that truth should be articulated in propositional form, and thus undercuts his own “unequivocal” affirmation. McLaren doesn't like answering questions, either. Even though he would be more appropriately categorized as a “post-evangelical,” McLaren was listed as one of 25 influential evangelicals in the February 7, 2005 edition of *TIME* magazine. In its profile, *TIME* referred to a conference last spring at which McLaren was addressed with a question related to gay marriage. “You know what,” McLaren responded, “The thing that breaks my heart is that there's no way I can answer it without hurting someone on either side.” *TIME* referred to this as “a kinder and gentler brand of religion.” Others would be less charitable, for McLaren's “nonanswer” is itself an

answer. This is a man who doesn't want to offend anyone on any side of any argument. That's why it's hard to find the orthodoxy in *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

As McLaren admits, "People who try to label me an exclusivist, inclusivist, or universalist on the issue of hell will find here only more reasons for frustration." In other words, McLaren simply refuses to answer the question as to whether there will be anyone in hell. He refers to these questions—evangelical hang-ups for the doctrinally moribund—as "weapons of mass distraction."

McLaren effectively ransacks the Christian tradition, picking and choosing among theological options without any particular concern for consistency. He rejects the traditional understanding of doctrine as statements of biblical truth and instead presents a variant of postmodernism—effectively arguing that doctrines form a language that is meaningful to Christians, even if not objectively true. He claims to be arguing for "a generous third way beyond the conservative and liberal versions of Christianity so dominant in the Western world."

Incredibly, McLaren simply asserts that concern for the propositional truthfulness of the text is an artifact of the modern age, "modern-Western-moderately-educated desires." As a postmodernist, he considers himself free from any concern for propositional truthfulness, and simply wants the Christian community to embrace a pluriform understanding of truth as a way out of doctrinal conflict and impasse.

What about other belief systems? McLaren suggests that we should embrace the existence of different faiths, "willingly, not begrudgingly." What would this mean? Well, a complete reconsideration of Christian missions, for one thing. McLaren claims to affirm that Christians should give witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. But, before you assume this means an affirmation of Christian missions, consider this statement: "I must add, though, that I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents 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. This will be hard, you say, and I agree. But frankly, it's not at all easy to be a follower of Jesus in many 'Christian' religious contexts, either."

Citing missiologist David Bosch, McLaren affirms that we have no assurance that salvation is found outside the work of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, he believes that we cannot jump from this to a claim that there is no salvation outside belief in Jesus Christ.

The Bible, McLaren argues, is intended to equip God's people for good works. He rejects words such as authority, inerrancy, and infallibility as unnecessary and distracting. In a previous work, McLaren had argued that the Bible is "a unique collection of literary artifacts that together support the telling of an amazing and essential story." His thinking shows the influence of the so-called "Yale School" of theologians who have argued for Scripture as the record and substance of Christianity as a "cultural-linguistic system," to be interpreted as narrative and not as propositional truth.

The Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity. Unwilling to affirm that the Bible contains propositional truths that form the framework for Christian belief, this movement argues that we can have Christian symbolism and substance without those thorny questions of truthfulness that have so vexed the modern mind. The worldview of postmodernism—complete with an epistemology that denies the possibility of or need for propositional truth—affords the movement an opportunity to hop, skip and jump throughout the Bible and the history of Christian thought in order to take whatever pieces they want from one theology and attach them, like doctrinal post-it notes, to whatever picture they would want to draw.

When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this movement simply refuses to answer the questions.

McLaren attributes this to humility. "A generous orthodoxy," he explains, "in contrast to the tense, narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, doesn't take itself too seriously. It is humble; it doesn't claim too much; it admits it walks with a limp." In other words, it is so humble that it will not answer some questions that will not rest without an answer. In this case, a nonanswer is an answer. A responsible theological argument must acknowledge that difficult questions demand to be answered. We are not faced with an endless array of doctrinal variants from which we can pick and choose. Homosexuality either will or will not be embraced as normative. The church either will or will not

accept a radical revisioning of the missionary task. We will either see those who have not come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as persons to whom we should extend a clear gospel message and a call for decision, or we will simply come alongside them to tell our story as they tell their own.

The problem with A Generous Orthodoxy, as the author must surely recognize, is that this orthodoxy bears virtually no resemblance to orthodoxy as it has been known and affirmed by the church throughout the centuries. Honest Christians know that disagreements over issues of biblical truth are inevitable. But we owe each other at least the honesty of taking a position, arguing for that position from Scripture, and facing the consequences of our theological convictions.

Orthodoxy must be generous, but it cannot be so generous that it ceases to be orthodox. Inevitably, Christianity asserts truths that, to the postmodern mind, will appear decidedly ungenerous. Nevertheless, this is the truth that leads to everlasting life. The gospel simply is not up for renegotiation in the twenty-first century. A true Christian generosity recognizes the infinitely generous nature of the truth that genuinely saves. Accept no substitutes.

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