NEOORTHOPRAXY AND BRIAN D. MCLAREN:
A POSTMODERN RECONSTRUCTION
OF KINGDOM OF GOD THEOLOGY

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NEOORTHOPRAXY AND BRIAN D. MCLAREN:
A POSTMODERN RECONSTRUCTION
OF KINGDOM OF GOD THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

NEOORTHOPRAXY AND BRIAN D. MCLAREN: A POSTMODERN RECONSTRUCTION OF KINGDOM OF GOD THEOLOGY

This dissertation critiques Brian D. McLaren’s postmodern reconstruction of theology and its development of neoorthopraxy which emphasizes social action and undermines orthodoxy. It discusses and analyzes McLaren’s application of postmodern epistemology to Scripture and theology and his construction of neoorthopraxy. It shows how McLaren constructs his Kingdom of God hermeneutic to support his neoorthopraxy. It offers a critical assessment by analyzing the effect of postmodern epistemology on incarnational theology, the relationship between evangelism and social action, the Kingdom of God in Scripture, and the effect of postmodern epistemology on his understanding of the person of Christ.

Given the absence of exclusive truth within his theology, McLaren uses biblical teachings on the Kingdom of God to form the basis for his neoorthopraxy. Neoorthopraxy is concerned with restoration of God’s Kingdom in the world with the help of humans engaging in social action to avoid and undo ill effects of injustice. Whereas orthodox Christians have found unity in their exclusive truth claims, McLaren offers unity in his call to social action. Finally, McLaren’s neoorthopraxy fails to present an orthodox view of Christ’s person.

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Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011
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<td>Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</td>
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<td>CD</td>
<td><em>Church Dogmatics</em></td>
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<td>ECM</td>
<td>Emerging Church Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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<td>SGM</td>
<td>Social Gospel Movement</td>
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PREFACE

A growing awareness of the burgeoning need for Christ among Americans led me to pursue doctoral studies. After studying various church growth methodologies and examining their effectiveness within a postmodern context, I became aware of the Emerging Church with the help of Dean Keith Eitel. Thorough examination of the literature produced on this subject demonstrated a commonality with my research interests. In particular, many within the Emerging Church are concerned about American missions in the postmodern context. Since advocates of postmodernism sometimes challenge the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, I became particularly interested in discovering the response of emerging writers.

Given that the Emerging Church contains many writers with a wide range of positions, I decided to focus on Brian D. McLaren because many Emerging Church proponents and critics consider him to be the leader of the movement. After discovering that McLaren maintains a postmodern view that denies that truth can be known with certainty, I felt compelled to discover the basis of his theology and his ecclesiology. My discovery, which is covered at length in this dissertation, has led me to conclude that faithfulness to God within a postmodern context requires one to reaffirm the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. 
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Thesis

The purpose of this study is to present a critique of Brian D. McLaren’s postmodern reconstruction of theology and its development of neoorthopraxy which emphasizes action and undermines orthodoxy. First, this dissertation will demonstrate McLaren’s application of postmodern epistemology in his deconstruction of orthodoxy and in his construction of neoorthopraxy which extends salvation to all creation and invites humanity to participate in the Kingdom of God by searching for truth and engaging in social action. Second, it will demonstrate that McLaren’s neoorthopraxy produces an unbiblical incarnational theology, an evangelism that over-emphasizes social action, a non-biblical view of God’s Kingdom, and a non-orthodox view of the person of Christ.¹ The dissertation argues that Brian D. McLaren, through his application of

¹Orthopraxy, as used in this dissertation, is right action informed by an orthodox view of Scripture. Orthodoxy can have a wide range of meanings but here it will only be referring to the traditional beliefs of conservative evangelical Christians. Neoorthopraxy elevates orthopraxy over orthodoxy by affirming and applying a postmodern epistemology to the exegesis of Scripture which produces uncertainty concerning any meaning that may arise. Like orthopraxy, neoorthopraxy is concerned with right action; however, that action is constantly being informed by one’s experience instead of arising solely from one’s beliefs because one’s beliefs are held with skepticism produced by a postmodern epistemological approach to Scripture. Such an approach produces theological views which are not wholly biblical because they do not arise solely from the words of Scripture. In this dissertation, the term biblical refers to any teaching derived from the study of Scripture that is held by conservative evangelicals.
postmodern epistemology to Scripture and theology, constructs a form of neoorthopraxy which extends salvation to all creation and invites humanity to participate in the Kingdom of God by searching for truth and engaging in social action but fails to present an orthodox view of the person of Christ.

**Methodology**

This dissertation will present a critical analysis of McLaren’s books and articles. Further analysis of McLaren’s views is subsequently drawn from recordings of his speaking engagements. On his blog, McLaren frequently reacts to questions and responses provided by both his readers and critics. Hence, this research interacts extensively with his blog to clarify his positions on various issues that arise in this research project.

First, this dissertation discusses and analyzes McLaren’s application of postmodern epistemology to Scripture and theology. Second, it analyzes critically McLaren’s construction of neoorthopraxy and demonstrates his preference for action over truth which leads to an ethical universalism. Third, it shows how McLaren constructs his Kingdom of God hermeneutic to support his neoorthopraxy and its effect on the gospel, the person of Christ, and eschatology. Fourth, it offers a critical assessment of McLaren’s neoorthopraxy by analyzing the effect of postmodern epistemology on incarnational theology, the relationship between evangelism and social action, the Kingdom of God in Scripture, and the effect of postmodern epistemology on the person of Christ.
Brian D. McLaren

Brief Biography

McLaren, born in 1956, attended a Plymouth Brethren church as a child in the 1950s and 1960s and became “a passionately committed disciple in [his] teen years through the early 1970s Jesus movement.” He received undergraduate and graduate degrees in English at the University of Maryland and two honorary doctorates in divinity from Carey Theological Seminary (2004) and Virginia Theological Seminary (2010). After teaching English for a few years, McLaren left that profession and started Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland in 1986 where he remained until 2006 when he chose to pursue his writing and speaking career full-time.

He is a founding member of “the Seed Fellowship, a network for church planters,” and has served on executive boards of several non-profit agencies including International Teams (www.iteams.org), Off the Map (www.off-the-map.org), Sojourners Magazine (www.sojo.net), Emergent Village (www.emergentvillage.com), Orientación


Cristiana (www.integral-mission.org), and Mars Hill Graduate School. McLaren has taught various courses at several seminaries including Fuller Seminary (California), Biblical Theological Seminary (Pennsylvania), Western Seminary (Oregon), and Mars Hill Graduate School (Washington).

**Placement within the Emerging Church**

To understand the Emerging Church Movement, Mark DeVine chooses to separate it into two categories: “doctrine friendly” and “doctrine wary and doctrine-averse.” DeVine places Tim Keller, Mark Driscoll, Ed Stetzer, and Rafael E. McManus in the doctrine friendly group. He then suggests that Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Tony Jones, Eddie Gibbs, and Ryan Bolger belong in the “doctrine wary/averse stream.” Rob Bell and Dan Kimball, according to DeVine, move back and forth between these two extremes. Like DeVine, C. Michael Patton also narrows those within the ECM to two

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8Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), vi. 1 In this book, Rob Bell appears to be moving toward universalism and therefore may be better placed in the “doctrine wary/averse stream.” He writes, “A staggering number of people have been
broad categories: “those that are emerging and those that are Emergent.” Within Patton’s classification system, emergents are those who are doctrine wary/averse while emerging Christians are more conservative in their doctrinal views but are not fundamentalist in their positions though they may be aligned with evangelical theology.

Stetzer, aware of Patton’s two broad categories, separates the ECM into three groups: “Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.” Among Relevants are those who are more conservative and evangelical in their doctrinal positions. Stetzer and Darrell L. Bock present Driscoll and Kimball as representative of this category.

Driscoll taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.”


10Ed Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective,” in Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2009), 70-73; Scott Bader-Saye, “Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation,” International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church 6, no. 1 (2006):13-14. Bader-Saye seems to support Stetzer’s categories but calls each a different name. The “Evangelical Pragmatists” seem to be equivalent to the Relevants because they are interested in “cultural and stylistic change” but not theological change. The “Post-Evangelical Emergents” are like the Revisionists because they are willing to change theology as well. The “Mainline Missionals,” just as the Reconstructionists, are focused primarily on changing church structures.

adds Bell and Donald Miller. The second group, Reconstructionists, focuses primarily on restructuring churches based on an incarnational model and include, according to Bock and Driscoll, Neil Cole, Alan Hirsch, and Michael Frost. Revisionists, the most theologically liberal members of the ECM, present views that stand outside of traditional orthodoxy. Stetzer and Bock place McLaren, Jones, and Pagitt into this group. Revisionists, according to Douglas K. Blount, embrace postmodernism and attempt to return Christian faith not to its Apostolic roots but to “a new and distinct faith.” Thomas N. Smith places McLaren within this theologically liberal category based on several reasons: McLaren’s syncretism with postmodernism, his “aversion to the idea of sin as total human depravity; [his] aversion to the wrath of God against human beings as sinners; [his] aversion to penal, substitutionary atonement theology; and [his] aversion to the sovereignty of God in providence and grace.”

Because of the broad spectrum of opinions within the ECM and its lack of a recognized leader, some writers, like Kester Brewin, are convinced that conversation among its members will be ongoing because their conception of truth will continue to


The Emerging Church, according to Dwight J. Friesen, is not in search of agreement among its members because it has “a higher vision of unity” based on paradox of the Trinity. This paradox calls on emerging Christians to admit that their quest for truth is a never-ending search, shrouded by mystery and devoid of absolute certainty. In response to those who criticize the Emerging Church, Gibbs and Bolger suggest that emerging churches simply “remove modern practices of Christianity, not the faith itself.”

Jim Belcher expresses concern that many critics of the Emerging Church have focused on its more extreme elements and tend to reduce their arguments of the Emerging Church to writings of major proponents like McLaren. Scot McKnight and Stetzer make the same accusation against D. A. Carson’s critique of the Emerging Church entitled Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church. Carson’s work, according to McKnight, wrongly convicts the ECM of maintaining a postmodern epistemology

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17Kevin Brewin, Signs of Emergence: A Vision for Church that is Organic/Networked/Decentralized/Bottom-up/Communal/Flexible {Always Evolving} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 110. Even though Brewin says that “no key leader” exists for the ECM, many scholars consider McLaren to be the unofficial leader. McLaren, however, never characterizes himself this way.

18Dwight J. Friesen, Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2009), 26.


20Jim Belcher, Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 49.

because his in-depth conversations with emerging leaders and theologians, including Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, F. LeRon Shults, and John R. Franke, have never generated a denial “of the truthfulness of the gospel or [a denial] that there is truth in a hard postmodernist way.”

Despite this, McKnight later admits that McLaren “does represent the more progressive wing . . . [and n]o one today better expresses, like a beat poet, both the ironic faith of emergents.”

Mark Liederbach and Alvin L. Reid go one step further than McKnight by directly accusing McLaren of having accepted postmodern epistemology.

**Influence**

Within the ECM, many of its members deny that a “single theologian or spokesperson” exists for their movement because they consider themselves “a conversation and friendship, and neither implies unanimity—not necessarily consensus—of opinion.” Nevertheless, Time Magazine in 2005 identified McLaren, “an elder statesman” of the ECM and called him one of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.”

Due to his incredible influence in the contemporary world, McLaren has

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22 Ibid., 3.


24 Mark Liederbach and Alvin L. Reid, The Convergent Church: Missional Worshippers in an Emerging Culture (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 162.


26 “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America: Brian McLaren: Paradigm
received many designations by those who are familiar with his work. He has been called a leader within the Emergent Village, “the most influential leader of the Emerging Church,” “the foremost emergent statesman,” the pastor of postconservatism, and the primary voice of both the ECM and Emergent Village especially in America. Phyllis Tickle goes so far as to compare McLaren to Martin Luther: “In the same way Martin Luther became the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great Reformation, so too has McLaren become the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great Emergence.”

**Critique**

As a popular voice in the Emerging Church and a prolific writer, McLaren has certainly received his fair share of criticism, some of which deserves critique. McLaren accuses some of his many critics of making inaccurate statements, being “unfair,” judging, refusing to self-examine, “name-calling,” being harsh, and creating...
disharmony. McLaren prefers critics from academia to aim their criticism toward those scholars from whom he derives influence. Since McLaren possesses not a single degree in theology, his request at first glance seems easy to grant. Unfortunately, McLaren’s influence through his many books, blogs, and speaking engagements across the world, compounded by the efficiency of internet in spreading his influence, requires scholars (especially those who focus on missions and evangelism) to consider implications of his views in regard to missions and evangelism. In this dissertation, the goal will be a fair and balanced criticism of McLaren’s neoorthopraxy from a professing conservative, Southern Baptist, evangelical viewpoint.

A criticism of McLaren’s neoorthopraxy is timely for several reasons. First, McLaren “frequently hear[s] from young Southern Baptists who express deep frustration with the ethos and image projected by some of their leaders in recent years: they want their denomination to rise above the old polarities of left and right, choosing transcendent [b]iblical values over ideological and partisan alignments.” Second, he incurs some

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31Tony Jones, The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 54. According to Jones, McLaren has met with people in every continent to discuss emergent Christianity.


33Brian McLaren, “Good News for Southern Baptists” (10 March, 2008) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from
criticism among Southern Baptists including several seminary professors who call McLaren’s version of Christianity a “wholesale rejection of the gospel,” “Christianity in the image of the culture,” “neither new nor Christian,” “old kind of apostasy,” and “wholesale rejection of everything fundamental in the Christian faith.” Given McLaren’s many conversations with Southern Baptists and corresponding criticism that his efforts have received from some within their ranks, a scholarly criticism of McLaren’s views will be helpful to all Southern Baptist who are contemplating his arguments in light of their conservative evangelical heritage.

**Explanation of Neoorthopraxy**

David M. Mills observes the relationship of orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the Emerging Church which, in his opinion, generally values orthodoxy “only as means to orthopraxy.” The focus on orthopraxy may have arisen from three faults, listed by Jim Belcher, that emerging churches find with traditional churches. First, they argue that churches have been approaching God and the world with a modernist mentality which is more concerned on delineating truth. Second, emerging writers believe many

http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/03/good-news-for-southern-baptist.html; Internet.


churches have limited their understanding of salvation to God’s work within individual souls instead of motivating their members to participate in God’s Kingdom and to bring salvation to the earth by living their faith actively in the world. Third, they insist that reaching postmodern culture will require churches to place belonging before believing.

Michael Slaughter and Warren Bird agree with Belcher and add that emerging churches focus on asking right questions and not giving right answers.³⁷ Pagitt even calls on people attending his church to profess Christian belief even though they do not really believe because “the process of believing anything begins with trying it on.”³⁸ Instead of the process beginning with an affirmation of Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension wrought by a change in heart whereby God grants a new believer gifts of repentance and faith, Pagitt suggests that belief begins with individual experience.

Experiencing Christian faith leads many emergents to focus their efforts on orthopraxy without first affirming orthodoxy according to Mills’ analysis: “Far from downplaying the importance of propositional truth, many in the emergent conversation are trying to live out the truth of the gospel in word and deed, calling [Christians] away from the idolatrous temptation to worship [their] own theoretical constructions rather than the One True God.”³⁹ Mills’ assessment may be correct, but it also is somewhat convoluted because it affirms emergent belief in propositional truths even while

³⁷Michael Slaughter and Warren Bird, Unlearning Church: Just When You Thought You Had Leadership All Figured Out!, Loveland, CO: Group, 2002), 81.

³⁸Doug Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 165.

³⁹Mills, “Mountain or Molehill?, 63.
acknowledging their unwillingness to make theoretical observations about God. This inconsistency, however, is quite easily resolved when one differentiates between a declaration of the importance of orthodoxy and an affirmation of it. Some within the emergent conversation readily admit their respect for orthodoxy even while they maintain their search for truth. The present study will consider McLaren’s contribution to the emergent conversation and demonstrate his approach to orthodoxy and orthopraxy which will be called neoorthopraxy.

Neoorthopraxy is a postmodern reconstruction of Kingdom of God theology that attempts to separate orthopraxy from orthodoxy. It arises from postmodern epistemology applied to Scripture and theology and leads to an ongoing state of uncertainty regarding any objective truth claims arising from Scripture. Neoorthopraxy does not entail a denial of existence of orthodoxy; rather, it encourages ongoing searches for it. While searching for orthodoxy, Christians are called to orthopraxy where the results of one’s social actions determine whether or not one’s behavior is right action. In this way, neoorthopraxy exalts social action and the ongoing quest for truth, both of which appeal to postmodernists who tend to lean heavily on experience to make their decisions. Neoorthopraxy and the social gospel are very similar except for their approaches to Scripture. The Social Gospel Movement arose from the work of higher

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41 Ibid., 92, 96, 110. McLaren argues that personal and social actions are a part of orthopraxy. However, his personal actions seem to be social actions as well. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the larger category of social actions. A second reason for referring to social actions is McLaren’s argument that Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor is a unifying call to all people of all faiths. This call implies the performance of a social act.
criticism that placed much of Scripture in the category of myth. Neoorthopraxy places it in the category of mystery.

This dissertation examines McLaren’s postmodern reconstruction of theology and its development into neoorthopraxy which invites people into an ongoing search for truth and a present engagement in social action so that the Kingdom of God will be fully restored within the present creation. Neoorthopraxy essentially promotes involvement in social action and the ongoing quest for truth and constructs a Kingdom of God theology without the affirmation of objective religious truths. Since McLaren continues to affirm his neoorthopraxy, this dissertation critiques his incarnational theology, his understanding of evangelism in relation to social action, his interpretation of the Kingdom of God in relation to the person of Christ, and challenges his postmodern hermeneutic to deal adequately with his own views regarding Christ’s person.

To develop contours for his neoorthopraxy, McLaren limits doctrine in the postmodern context to orthodox paradoxes found in the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed.42 Beyond these orthodox paradoxes, McLaren develops a more attractive approach to theological inquiry: those who study the Bible must first see themselves as learners, who are willing to acknowledge that some of the Bible’s teachings are mysterious, and then proceed to mission even while continuing the life-long process of developing a more clear understanding of the Bible.43 By affirming only paradoxes within these creeds and

42 Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 231.

43 Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel (Grand Rapids: EmergentYS, 2003), 75-76.
relegating all Christians to the status of learners, McLaren offers a “minimalist concept of orthodoxy” which unifies everyone in their search for truth.\textsuperscript{44} This orthodoxy is fallacious because it leads to a lot of ambiguity concerning more controversial elements within McLaren’s theology even while “secur[ing] the widest possible agreement.”\textsuperscript{45}

**Explanation of Selected Terms**

To eliminate any confusion, several terms in the present study must be carefully delimited. First, “Emerging Church,” “Emergent Village,” “emergent,” and “ECM” are employed in various ways in publications where they are discussed. “Emergent Village” refers specifically to the group associated with www.emergentvillage.com. While some scholars describe members of Emergent Village as emergent, others use emergent to refer to all people associated with the Emerging Church. Here, “emergent” will refer to all people involved in the Emerging Church.\textsuperscript{46} The application of emergent to all emerging church members does not imply that all members

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45}D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 119. Carson discusses a fallacy where a group of people use language to conceal meaning. Each member of this group agrees to the language used by the group even while interpreting the language differently. The result is the appearance of unity, but this conceals the truth that no unity exists. Many emergents call their movement a conversation and recommend (and/or praise) one another’s works even while claiming not to support the particular of any given member of their community. The effect of their approach to one another is the appearance of unity even while they claim no unity on the specifics in most cases.

\textsuperscript{46}While Emerging Church members represent a broad spectrum of viewpoints and often do not agree with McLaren on variety of topics, McLaren’s many publications, on-line materials, and worldwide speaking engagements have caused many to view him as the leader of the ECM. This dissertation therefore prefers to use “Emerging Church” instead of “emergent” because of McLaren’s close association with the Emerging Church.
share the same beliefs as other emerging church members or members of the Emergent Village. “Emerging Church,” as employed in this study, refers to all people engaged in the ECM, a term which describes the broader conversation, that continues presently, between those who have identified themselves as Emerging Church members. Given that McLaren is a member of the Emergent Village and a voice of profound influence in the ECM, he is to be associated with all four terms: “Emerging Church,” “ECM,” “emergent,” and “Emergent Village.”

The second group of terms is associated with the meaning of objective truth within the present study. Here, objective truth refers generally to any exclusive religious truth claim especially those claims that use the Bible for foundational support. In particular, objective truth refers to various doctrines held by conservative evangelicals including doctrines of original sin, salvation, election, hell, sola scriptura, and sola fide. This study will focus primarily on McLaren’s handling of these objective truth claims. Within its contents, there is no intention to suggest that McLaren does not believe in objective truth outside of exclusive claims previously listed.

Since this dissertation focuses on McLaren’s theology in relation to that of conservative evangelicals, brief discussion must be provided concerning identities of these evangelicals and any related terms. “Modern evangelicalism,” according to Gary B. McGee, “now encompasses an almost unbridgeable diversity of Christians, all loyal to the gospel message, but with varying theological and spiritual orientations.” Since evangelicals possess so much theological diversity, conservative evangelicalism must be
delineated to avoid confusion. Conservative evangelicals, therefore, are those evangelicals who affirm historic doctrines of Christian faith as exclusive truth claims that arise from Scripture. These claims can be accurately interpreted through study of Scripture and accurately articulated in doctrinal formulations that proclaim exclusive truth. Where these doctrines make such claims, all other competing claims are viewed as false by conservative evangelicals. Of the many historical Christian doctrines proffered by conservative evangelicals, the present study focuses primarily on doctrines of original sin, salvation, election, hell, *sola scriptura*, and *sola fide*. This explanation of conservative evangelicalism particularly excludes any affirmation of any specific millennial views.

The fourth set of terms which need clarification includes “social action” and “social service.” Social action includes “[r]emoving the causes of human need, [p]olitical and economic activity, [s]eeking to transform the structures of society, and [t]he quest for justice.” Social service includes “[r]elieving human need, [p]hilanthropic activity, [s]eeking to minister to individuals and families, and [w]orks of mercy.” Social service focuses on ministering to others by helping relieve human suffering, while social action seeks to change societal structures to remove injustice and prevent it from recurring. This study maintains a distinction between social action and social services, but it also expands social action to refer to both social action and social service as a whole.

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CHAPTER 2
POSTMODERN THEOLOGY OF BRIAN D. MCLAREN

Around the mid 1990s, McLaren began to syncretize his theology with postmodernism by learning to view truth as “human and contextual” in order to be more effective in reaching postmodernists.\(^49\) Postmodernism, as he sees it, is “a once-in-a-millennium opportunity to do some very creative and exciting and historic work.”\(^50\) Carl Raschke agrees, “Postmodernism, therefore, may at one level be regarded as an invitation to draw Christianity . . . back to its beginnings” not unlike the Reformation.\(^51\) Those churches, that embrace postmodernism, will have success in coming years while those who do not will continue to decline.\(^52\)

\(^49\)Brian McLaren, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” in *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors*, ed. Michael Duduit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 117-18; Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 13. For McLaren, reaching postmodernists requires a presentation of truths within Scripture as part of the larger narrative. Instead of offering proof texts to prove various theological points, he prefers to present people with the whole narrative within Scripture and invite them on a journey of discovery regarding the meaning of these narratives. Reaching people, in this way, does not mean leading them to affirm particular truth claims; rather, it means having them participate in a search for what is true.


\(^52\)Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 23.
In response to a changing context, Carson encourages emerging theologians to affirm those traditions that are worthy of acceptance even while they attempt to apply theology to a postmodern context:

If theologians restrict themselves to the former task, they may become purveyors of antiquarian artifacts, however valuable those artifacts may be; if they focus primarily on the latter task, it is not long before they squander their heritage and become, as far as the gospel is concerned, largely irrelevant to the world they seek to reform, because wittingly or unwittingly they domesticate the gospel to the contemporary worldview.\(^5\)

Carson’s advice is timely because emergents like McLaren express a strong desire to be relevant to the postmodern world, but such a desire, according to Gary L. W. Johnson, has led to a Christianity that is syncretized with postmodernism.\(^5\) Syncretism, Carson believes, has led some emergents to develop an “emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion; on participation over against individualism.”\(^5\) Through his emphasis on dissolution of truth as an absolute construct and insufficiency of logic, McLaren deconstructs theology due to his postmodern epistemology.

This chapter discusses McLaren’s application of deconstructive hermeneutical methods to Scripture and theology. It then demonstrates McLaren’s syncretization of


\(^5\)D. A. Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29.
theology with postmodern culture. The last section shows how McLaren’s syncretization allows him to deemphasize objective truth and reconstruct theology based on his postmodern epistemology.

**Postmodern Deconstruction of Theology**

Erickson provides two general categories for postmodern epistemology: “soft” postmodernism remains open to knowledge derived in part from logic and “hard” postmodernism “reject[s] any sort of objectivity and rationality.” For “hard” postmodernists, “Truth is defined according to individual, subjective categories, or at best community-specific, intersubjective categories.” Carson places McLaren in the category of hard postmodernism because McLaren connects theological enterprises of reformers to their modern context instead of acknowledging faithful work by reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin to interpret Scripture properly.


58 Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 179-80; Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church,” 85; McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?,” 2. Stetzer affirms Carson’s assessment of McLaren but McKnight disagrees because he believes McLaren’s Christianity prevents him from being a hard postmodernist; furthermore, McKnight believes Carson should allow McLaren to choose how best to identify himself. These criticisms, however, seem to avoid critical evidence found in McLaren’s writings. While McLaren does profess Christianity, one must remember that many Christians, even those deemed heretics, have professed Christ. Therefore, any assessment of McLaren’s view in light of orthodox teachings can help one discover the exact nature of his Christianity. For McKnight’s second criticism of Carson, one must
Instead of hard or soft categories for postmodernism, Michael Pocock posits four types of postmodernists: those who still have hope in modernism, those who deconstruct all truths, those who are reconstructing new truths, and those who have grown weary of their own reconstructions. Of these, McLaren fits well with “Reconstructive Postmoderns” who remain “hopeful that a new paradigm is out there” and trend toward being “pluralistic and dialogue-oriented . . . ‘instrumentalists’ in they are looking for what works.” Before developing a new paradigm, a postmodern reconstruction of theology begins with a deconstruction of Scripture.

**Deconstructing Scripture**

Like Pocock, David Ray Griffin says that postmodernism occurs in “four basic types,” each sharing a disdain for modernism: “(1) constructive (or revisionary), (2) deconstructive (preliminative), (3) liberationist, and (4) restorationist (or

remember that people, in this case McLaren, see themselves in a particular way and their view can benefit from additional assessment by others. To this end, Carson has worked quite diligently.


60 Ibid. Emphasis is his.

conservative).” Of these, Carson labels deconstruction as the most radical because it traps people within a “hermeneutical circle” because of a supposed “inability of language to refer outside itself.”

Deconstructive postmodernism, as an outgrowth of modernism, accepts modernism’s core principle, namely, the idea that self is disconnected from God, and then follows it up with a complete denial of God’s existence. As Mark Taylor so aptly puts it, “deconstruction is the ‘hermeneutic’ of the death of God.” In disagreement with Taylor, John D. Caputo says, “deconstruction is . . . the hermeneutics of the [K]ingdom of God, [that is] an interpretive style that helps get at the prophetic spirit of Jesus.” This disagreement, however, can be resolved when one understands that postmodernists like Caputo and McLaren affirm God’s existence but deny human ability to know (with absolute certainty) anything particular about Him.

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The hermeneutic of deconstruction arose from Jacques Derrida’s denial of the referential ability of language to refer ultimately to God and thus led to his conclusion that deconstruction “blocks every relationship to theology.” Derrida’s thinking leads him to conclude that the central focus of understanding can never be derived because “an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse.” Hans Frei, who was influenced by Derrida and who in turn influenced McLaren, places the referent in front of the text instead of within the text so that each interpreter can get a sense of the text without ever discovering, with certainty, the true meaning that is within it.

In response to Derrida’s deconstructionism, Edward O. Wilson argues that Derrida’s own arguments for deconstruction fall victim to his reader’s employment of deconstruction as they seek to interpret his meaning and find the endeavor to be impossible. Given McLaren’s affirmation of Derrida’s deconstruction, the same


69 Edward O. Wilson, Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge (New York: Vintage, 1999), 44.
criticism could also be levied against any of his thoughts. When Derrida’s deconstructionist views are applied to biblical texts, all interpretations, as Carl F. H. Henry previously contended, become equally valid because God’s words become “intrinsically incapable of conveying truth about some objective reality.” Francis A. Schaeffer agreed and observed that a new theology is created which on its surface appears more satisfying than secular existentialism but in the end leads to neoorthodoxy where words only have “an illusion of meaning” and results in a limited relativism.

**Limited Relativity**

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. in his review of *Generous Orthodoxy*, accuses McLaren of embracing “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.” McLaren acknowledges that postmodern epistemology promotes a “limited relativism” that affirms “moral ambiguities in the Bible and in life.” To clarify his position, McLaren states on

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his blog that he “believe[s] that some things are morally good and others are morally evil.”

Since he denies an internal referent within Scripture, he chooses to rely on himself to make determinations on morality which even he must doubt given his postmodern epistemology.

“[L]imited relativism,” in McLaren’s understanding is more acceptable than “absolute relativism” because it affirms the presence of some truth (even if it cannot be known conclusively) and leaves room for elements of the Bible that are more mysterious. Several years later, he advocated “perspectival relativism,” which is, in essence, just another name for “limited relativism,” that is informed by “what God declares is good, wise, or right in a situation.” McLaren is attempting to establish God as the referent for truth and avoid the charge of having succumbed to secular relativism. By simply acknowledging God’s role as an informer on moral issues, McLaren still places the referent outside of Scripture because he stops short of declaring God to be the ultimate decision maker on these matters.

Since God is no longer the internal referent within His Word, McLaren chooses to look to himself for knowledge on matters of truth. To do so, McLaren looks for internal and logical consistency with other beliefs, its coherence with his experience,


77 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 257.

78 Ibid., 257-58.
a result that is beneficial to all people, and an appealing, outward manifestation in one who possesses true belief.79 In this way, McLaren demonstrates his partial support for the coherence theory of truth, but only when it is subjugated to his experience. In response, Douglass Groothuis says, “[A] set of beliefs held by fallible human beings may be coherent, but false.”80

McLaren’s use of logic to develop and determine his beliefs is widely seen in his many writings beginning with his first book.81 Even so, McLaren prefers wonder over logic and therefore offers evangelists no “formulas or outlines or lists of Bible verses to memorize in a certain order.”82 This does not mean that McLaren rejects the usefulness of logic only he does not want truth to be bound by it.83 For him, logic does not arise from and is not guided by any definitive truth claims; rather, it is simply one’s attempt to make sense what they can never fully understand.84 Within any truth to guide his thinking, logic, as employed and understood by McLaren, ultimately becomes illogical because logical thinking requires defined truths from which to proceed.

Since truth cannot be known with certainty through logical inquiry, determining truth becomes an ongoing quest where one relies on one’s relationship with

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81 McLaren, Finding Faith, 42, 77.
82 Brian D. McLaren, More Ready than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 146.
83 Ibid., 149.
84 Ibid.
God to guide him.\textsuperscript{85} Such a quest can never result in discernment of objective truth because McLaren rejects all laws of logic as ultimately improvable and therefore based on faith.\textsuperscript{86} Along with the lack of reliability of logical inquiry, one’s certainty is also clouded by linguistic barriers, culture, personalities, and various assumptions that are made to arrive at perceived certainty on a given matter.\textsuperscript{87}

By developing limited relativism based on a postmodern epistemology, McLaren hopes to gain more acceptance of Christianity among postmodernists “who are sensitive to overstatements that nudge faith toward dogmatism.”\textsuperscript{88} McLaren clarifies his point further:

\begin{quote}
[T]he need to put everything into nice neat categories is part of the problem. Modern people believed that they could create a nice framework that would pigeonhole everything. So if [people] succeed in creating a postmodern framework, . . . [they] just sabotaged it. . . . So [they had] better doubt and deconstruct [their framework] as fast as [they] construct them.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Doctrines Versus Distinctives}

To avoid some of the more grievous implications of deconstructionism, McLaren attempts to construct a postmodern theology by reducing doctrines to only those deemed most essential and focusing on morals associated with loving one’s neighbors while avoiding debating “unsolved dilemmas of abortion, homosexuality, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{85} McLaren, \textit{Finding Faith}, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 55.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 55.
\item \textsuperscript{88} McLaren, \textit{Reinventing Your Church}, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{89} McLaren, \textit{A New Kind of Christian}, 47.
\end{itemize}
This approach to theology is similar to that of Joseph Fletcher who elevated the law of love as the “successor to the commandments.”

McLaren believes other religions or worldviews, especially fundamentalists within those religions or worldviews should not be allowed to establish what correct morals are and prefers to look to the Bible for determining what is moral. His examination of Scripture leads him to conclude that loving God and others is the foundational moral principle underlying Scripture. He draws essential doctrines from the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed, both of which he claims to affirm.

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90 McLaren, Reinventing Your Church, 52-3, 59.

91 Joseph F. Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966; reprint, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 64, 74. The law of love, according to Fletcher, is defined by that which is considered “benevolent” and any such actions can be considered love. This understanding of love, however, fails to consider the meaning of love in relation to God. According 1 John 5:3, loving God means to obey His commands.

92 McLaren “Q & R: Postmodernism and Moral Absolutes.” Christian fundamentalists, in McLaren’s view, have failed to derive their beliefs solely from Scripture. He believes that they have held onto various non-biblical practices including “racism, sexism, a careless attitude toward the environment, a careless attitude toward the rights of Palestinians, a fear of science, and a fusion between the gospel and American nationalism.”

93 McLaren, “Q & R: Postmodernism and Moral Absolutes.”

Given McLaren’s postmodern epistemology, Liederbach and Reid conclude, “McLaren is at best confused and at worst disingenuous about claiming to accept the historic Creeds as the foundation of his faith for he is simultaneously denying the potency of their clear doctrinal nature.” In response to criticism that his work in *A New Kind of Christianity* entailed a rejection of the Creeds and historic Christian faith, McLaren responds that he does indeed embrace historic Christian faith, by which he means “dependence on God and openness to the Holy Spirit [and] connection and confidence in God.” Within these affirmations, McLaren neglects to mention his postmodern epistemology which allows him to affirm the Creeds and the Trinity while at the same time preventing him from connecting these affirmations to divinely revealed and therefore authoritative truth in Scripture.

Even so, he does choose to give Scriptures primacy over these creeds with a possible end result being new creeds. His decision, however, is guided once again by his postmodern epistemology which places doubt in any declaration of absolute truth such as the Creeds. McLaren’s lack of confidence leads him to place all historical views on Christian doctrines, both those considered orthodox and those considered heretical, on justice, Christ as “the Liberating King,” in the Gospels, and the absence of injustice in the Kingdom of God.

95 Liederbach and Reid, *The Convergent Church*, 163.


the same plain as the Creeds because, in his opinion, those that were labeled as heretical just lost the debate with opposing views of that time.98

Apart from doctrines within the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, McLaren labels all other doctrines as distinctives because they are unique to individual denominations and therefore “marginal” to a generous orthodoxy which focuses on orthopraxy.99 He describes a generous orthodoxy as

a consistent practice of humility, charity, courage, and diligence: humility that allows [Christians] to admit that [their] past and current formulations may have been limited or distorted. Charity toward those of other traditions who may understand some things better than [their] group. . . . Courage to be faithful to the true path of [their] faith as [they] understand it even when it is unpopular, dangerous, and difficult to do so. Diligence to seek again and again the true path of [their] faith.100

Within a generous orthodoxy, McLaren posits humility in one’s affirmation of doctrinal formulations from God’s Word because of his postmodern epistemology. One wonders, however, whether or not this form of humility is biblical. Peter acknowledges that Paul’s “letters contain some things that are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16).101 Even so, Peter is not suggesting that humanity is incapable of understanding these things. The writer of Proverbs consistently declares the ability of humanity to gain understanding.102 Jesus makes it clear to believing Jews that a real disciple knows truth and “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (John 8:32; 1

98 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 29.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 30. Emphasis is his.
101 The NIV translation (2011) will be used in this paper.
Tim 2:3-4). Both Timothy and John affirm Christians as those who know truth (1Tim 4:3; 1 John 2:21).

God clearly holds humanity accountable in the Garden of Eden for failing to apply his command to not eat fruit from the tree of life. Such accountability implies God’s expectation of humanity to discern clearly and apply His teaching to daily life. Despite His expectation, the serpent introduces a lack of clarity, according to John McArthur, because he was attempting to undermine many truths related to God’s Word including “inspiration, authority, inerrancy, sufficiency, and perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture.”

In a similar vein, McLaren’s postmodern epistemology also places these truths into doubt and ultimately prevents him from knowing exactly what God is saying. Uncertainty guides him to focus more heavily on postmodern culture as he continues to deconstruct his theology.

**Syncretization of Theology with the Postmodern Culture**

To become more effective at reaching people in the postmodern world, McLaren proposes “a radical rethinking of our evangelistic strategy” where making “converts to Christianity” and calling upon people to make “decisions for Christ” will become obsolete and be replaced by making disciples of Jesus Christ and promoting the

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Kingdom of God on earth. These disciples, as McLaren defines them, are practitioners of love within and for this present world who set about bringing reconciliation through their good works. Through acquiescence to McLaren’s postmodern evangelistic strategy, churches will begin preparing these disciples “for the benefit of the world” by promoting community, spirituality, and mission.  

Community, according to McLaren, encourages attitudes of belonging among all people as they seek to learn and live the gospel. His understanding of community, however, does not match the Apostle Paul’s understanding of church based on 1 Corinthians 14:13-24 where he speaks of non-believers attending church services. This indicates in and of itself that not all belong to the community of faith. While McLaren is right to want all people to belong to churches, Paul’s distinction indicates that shared beliefs separate believers and non-believers and, therefore, prevents non-believers from belonging.

Spirituality, McLaren opines, is both an individual and communal practice of praying, listening to others, fasting, studying, and worshipping. In 2011, he declares that spirituality is “centered on simple, doable practices that will help [one] begin and sustain a naked encounter with the holy mystery and pure loving presence that people


105 Ibid.


107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.
commonly call God.”¹⁰⁹ Spirituality, based on McLaren’s perspective, is based upon incomprehensible truth and a loving God who can only be known subjectively. McLaren equates it to the act of self-giving as exemplified by Christ and points out that true spirituality, in his view, is devoid of hate and exclusivity.¹¹⁰ McLaren’s understanding of spirituality equates with Thomas C. Oden’s definition: “Spirituality in the New Testament sense is not a moral program, not a set of rules, not a level of ethical achievement, not a philosophy, not a rhetoric, not an idea, not a strategy, not a theory of meditation, but rather simply life lived in Christ.”¹¹¹ In a recent conference of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, McLaren distinguishes between the terms, “religious” and “spiritual,” with the former presenting a dualist view of God as enemy of creation while the latter presents God as a friend and fellow partner in creation’s betterment.¹¹² He also prefers to call himself spiritual instead of religious because many religious people think they have all the answers.¹¹³ In this way, spirituality, for postmodernists like

¹⁰⁹ McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 3, 26-27. None of the spiritual practices considered by McLaren include the intensive study of Scripture and the application of its contents to one’s life.


¹¹³ Ibid.
McLaren, becomes “private and internal” because no centralized truth connects them to others with finality.\(^\text{114}\)

**Rejection of Reformation Theologies**

Despite his preference for a postmodern spirituality, McLaren believes it still contains some potentially harmful elements although he lacks clarity concerning its faults.\(^\text{115}\) He acknowledges that application of postmodernism to theology will likely lead to syncretism, but such syncretism is acceptable to him because many of his predecessors of the last few centuries including reformers like Luther and Calvin have also syncretized their theology with modernism.\(^\text{116}\) Even the Early Church, McLaren opines, syncretized their theology with Greco-Roman culture, with its inherent dualism and domination, in order to be more missiologically effective.\(^\text{117}\) In fairness to McLaren, some debate did exist in the Early Church concerning a relationship between Greek philosophy and the gospel. Tertullian wanted to keep them separate while Clement of Alexandria argued that “philosophy was a preparation, paving the way towards perfection in Christ.”\(^\text{118}\)

\(^{114}\) David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 110.


By connecting theologies of reformers like Luther and Calvin to a modernist worldview, McLaren has overlooked several historical facts. Luther, for example, set out to reform the Catholic Church whose influence pervaded his culture to no less extent than postmodernism pervades contemporary culture. Despite cultural encumbrances, Luther rejected much of his Church culture (and its traditions) at his hearing in Worms: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

Luther turned to Scripture as his source of authority while at the same time believing in his own ability to access its meaning. While McLaren may label Luther’s approach to theology as a modern approach, it does not follow that such an approach should be rejected simply because of the onset of postmodernism. Since McLaren chooses to apply postmodernism to theological construction, his postmodern epistemology leads him to reject the Bible as God’s Word revealed to humanity in the form of comprehensible truth claims.

McLaren’s concept of syncretism by theologians like Luther and Calvin may have arisen from Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke who believe “the systematic theologies of conservative modernists often give the appearance of being elaborate

119 Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 144.

120 Brian McLaren, “An Open Letter to Chuck Colson” [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.brianmclaren.net/emc/archives/imported/an-open-letter-to-chuck-colson.html; Internet; McLaren himself is wary of those who label him a postmodernist because he does believe in the existence of truth; therefore, it is important to note that postmodernism, as discussed in this paper, does not deny the existence of truth, only its knowability.
collections of loosely related facts derived from the Bible.” McLaren believes that Christians ought to change from narratives associated with Luther, Calvin, and the Early Church back to a Jewish narrative, in other words, the narrative of original hearers. By doing so, McLaren believes that Christians will avoid objectifying God and His Word. Duane Litfin agrees with McLaren that many Christians have approached God and His Word as autonomous individuals who are separated from God instead of approaching God through a personal relationship. Even so, he rejects postmodern epistemology: “The radical objectivism and neutrality claimed by the children of the Enlightenment have been critiqued by Christians from the beginning, and [McLaren] is right to repudiate them as unchristian, unbiblical. But by the same token, Christians also have no business embracing the equally radical perspectivism of postmodernity.” Unfortunately, radical perspectivism allows McLaren to doubt his ability to know God’s Word and forces him to look to experience for guidance.


122 Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren: Q1 The Narrative Question,” interview by Spencer Burke, TheOOZEtv (15 February, 2010), video [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqlOV2ZM24o&feature=related; Internet. McLaren adds that a better way to understand the biblical narrative is to start with Abraham and work forward and allow the Bible to “generate a narrative.”

Elevation of Experience

By depending on experience, Griffin believes that some facts can be known “in practice” including personal freedom, existence of reality independent from self, correspondence of real truth to that reality, and the ability to distinguish between good and bad. Here, Griffin is drawing from Alfred North Whitehead, whose subjective approach to objective reality is approved by McLaren, who says one’s experiences inform one’s metaphysics, but these experiences, which are not informed by metaphysical doctrines, do not, however, end in certainty. Believing that the Bible’s meaning can be informed by one’s experiences, McLaren employs an experiential hermeneutic to his theology and found that doing so left some previously helpful theological views in doubt. In such a case, McLaren believes one should be humble in their uncertainty and continue to look forward to a reconcilable view. McLaren discloses his experiential hermeneutic as the basis for his latest book: “Instead of seeking theological agreement, this book invites [readers] to experiment with the naked experience of God that provides the raw material from which all worthwhile theology derives.”

124 Griffin, “Postmodern Theology and A/theology,” 36. Emphasis is his.
126 McLaren, Finding Faith, 243; idem, New Kind of Christian, xiv.
God personally and directly apart from theological construction derived from His revealed Word.

**Experience within Postmodernism**

Many emerging writers, like McLaren, note that postmodernists tend to learn objective truth through their experiences. Jones, for example, writes, “All knowledge is arrived at holistically via [people’s] experiences” and redefines truth “as that which best matches [one’s] experience of life and is most coherent, pragmatic, and intellectually justifiable.” Similarly, Pagitt argues, “[T]he belief that leads to spiritual formation is not simply knowledge: It is centered in the way [people] understand and live in the world. Most beliefs are based on the ways [people] experience life.” Michael E. Wittmer disagrees, “Faith requires knowledge, for [one] cannot believe in what [one] do[es] not know.” To be fair, Pagitt is not claiming that information has no role in formation of one’s beliefs; rather, he believes that experience serves to validate information so that one will choose to believe it. This understanding of truth effectively elevates experience as a determining factor in deciding upon what to believe.

Mark Miller, for instance, advocates incorporation of “experiential education” to help people learn about God even while he admits that it “places trust in the learner to

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130 Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, *Church Re-Imagined*, 157.

131 Michael E. Wittmer, *Don’t Stop Believing: Why Living Like Jesus is Not Enough* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 40.

132 Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, *Church Re-Imagined*, 159.
derive meaning from his or her experience.” With such an approach to Scripture, “people [may] encounter Jesus ‘experientially’—whether or not they understand what’s just happened to them is of secondary importance.” Such an approach can only end in numerous interpretations that are each equally valid because no interpretation of biblical texts is given priority.

Peter Rollins, however, is willing to accept experiential learning because he believes advocacy of any given “theological system” of Scripture as authoritative would be “conceptual visibility” and therefore idolatry. Tim Keel agrees with Rollins and calls reduction of Scripture into theologies nothing more than “conceptual idolatry” whereby people worship their “ideas of and frameworks for God” instead of God Himself. To avoid succumbing to idolatry, McLaren believes authentic biblical worship entails a search for truth.

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133 Mark Miller, Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God’s Message (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 23. Brian offers critical praise on the cover of this book.


Subjugation of Scripture to Experience

Given Rollins, Keel, and McLaren’s disdain for theological concepts, one wonders how they can use biblical instruction of idolatry as a guiding means for approaching the Bible with any degree of certainty since they mistrust any particular interpretation of Scripture. McLaren argues that one should humbly admit one’s lack of certainty on such matters and then focus on those “biblical teachings that are clear and compelling without debate.” Since the Bible cannot provide a firm foundation for McLaren’s faith, he becomes free to develop his theology through his experience.

Carson, who affirms the necessity of a biblical foundation, argues that “traditional evangelicalism appears to be hard-edged and inflexible because it constantly thinks in truth-categories and does not perceive the legitimate place of experience.” Carson is not intending to lift experience above biblical truths; rather, he merely observes that a person’s experience has some bearing on what they acknowledge as truth. With the rise of relativism and pluralism in the postmodern age, both of which signal erosion of belief in foundational truths, one ought to consider how postmodernists came to view personal experience as the controlling hermeneutic for their understanding of truth.

Relation between Modernism and Postmodernism

Aided by forces of the industrial age, modernism led to a rise in individualism out of which postmodernism has developed. This new philosophy exalts a person’s experience of God over God Himself. Whereas premodern epistemology among Christian


139 Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church, 218.
theologians perceives God as the foundation of knowledge and assumes the presence of divine revelation, modern and postmodern epistemology perceive self as the foundation of knowledge. Modernists then search for a foundation via human rationality and many of them concluded Scripture to be foundational. Because of the modern preference for developing a foundation for faith via reason, McLaren frequently accuses evangelicals and scholars influenced by modernism of Cartesian foundationalism, despite denials from many evangelicals and scholars. Postmodernists, likewise, also are searching for a foundation, but their rejection of the usefulness of reasoning in their search leads them to conclude that reality cannot be known with certainty. Postmodern rejection of all external evidence in favor of their own experience is an inevitable consequence of forces of globalization which has brought many religious options to the individual combined with an endless supply of choices given to each consumer. These forces, according to David F. Wells, cause individuals to turn inward in a quest for stability.

Thus, individual perceived needs become the sole basis of activity and the sole reason for commitment. No longer do individuals determine appropriate actions based on communal needs, rather the individual begins with what he or she desires and proceeds to meet those desires irrespective of the desires of others. Wells observes that “the

140 Appendix 4 offers a detailed discussion on McLaren’s rejection of Cartesian foundationalism and an evangelical response.

141 Wells, Above All Earthly Pow’rs, 148.

142 Ibid.
autonomous self” is a common characteristic shared by modernists and postmodernists, “despite all the postmodern chatter about the importance of community.”143

With a self-centered mentality, postmodernists base any sense of God merely on subjective evidence from their personal experience and reject all historical and objective evidence such as the Bible. When approaching Scripture, postmodernists use a hermeneutic of personal experience which “privileges the text and elevates the reader” allowing readers to “define and create textual meaning.”144 Maurice S. Friedman, who advocates a postmodern hermeneutic, argues that individuals do “not have access to absolute Truth but only a relation to the truth and that the revelations of which the theologian speaks do not put [individuals] in firm possession of the ‘essence’ of God but speak to [them] in and out of particular historical situations.”145 Such a view, which elevates experience of readers while affirming the cultural setting within which the Bible was written, deconstructs the text by causing dissolution of the meaning of original authors.146

For those postmodernists who allow their experiences to be elevated over divine revelation, Bob DeWaay points out that ancient pagans, who had no access to Scripture but did have their experiences, became polytheist; likewise, emergents, who

143Ibid., 67-68.


146Ibid., 68.
fully embrace postmodernism, are becoming neo-pagans because their lack of foundational beliefs based on Scripture ultimately leads to pluralism.\textsuperscript{147} Whereas conservative evangelicals, whom many emergent leaders would accuse of having a modernist view of truth that closely associates truth with logic, argue that the Bible defines truth apart from one’s experience of reality. Some emergent leaders believe that the Bible’s meaning has a limited range of meaning which is controlled by one’s experience. Given that every person has a unique experience and everyone’s experience is different, the Bible’s meaning can quickly become obscured when one retains a postmodern epistemology which defines truth according to one’s experience. As Andreas J. Köstenberger declares, “Once contemporary context and experience are put on par with Scripture, the former two take precedence and Scripture’s authority is undermined, with the inevitable result that the gospel’s integrity is compromised.”\textsuperscript{148}

Unlike postmodernists, the modernists affirm the existence of an original meaning and set out to find it often by depending on efforts of historical critics.\textsuperscript{149} While this approach allows readers to maintain an objective view of the Bible, it sometimes has led to a false dichotomy, established by readers, whereby personal experience (that is, 

\textsuperscript{147}Bob DeWaay, \textit{The Emergent Church: Undefining Christianity} (Saint Louis Park, MN: Bob DeWaay, 2009), 90-93.


one’s daily life) is separated from truths revealed in Scripture. According to George A. Lindbeck, objectification of Scripture occurred in the wake of the Reformation:

Pietists were wary of any use except that of legitimating and evoking a particular kind of religious experience; legalists and social activists looked only for directives for personal or collective behavior; the rationally orthodox used the Bible as a proof text for unchanging propositional doctrines; fundamentalists argued about its scientific accuracy and their opposite numbers, the biblical critics, treated Scripture as a set of clues for reconstructing what actually happened or was actually taught back in the days of Moses and Jesus.¹⁵⁰

Postmodernists avoid false dichotomies because of their determination to have the biblical text “stand on its own.”¹⁵¹ The advantage to their approach to Scripture is the opportunity it affords readers to engage in a dialogue between their personal experiences and Scripture whereby Scripture can communicate truth in midst of their experiences affording individuals opportunities to alter their lives accordingly. On the other hand, such a view of the Scriptures can easily lead postmodernists to assign meaning to the text derived from personal experience.

Truth, unlike experience, must be grounded in Scripture, but experience, “may prompt [one] to revise [one’s] previous understanding of the truth.”¹⁵² By separating truth from one’s understanding of truth, postmodern Christianity has found a way to replace the modernistic approach (with its emphasis on logic) with a postmodern approach which attempts to allow truth to be united with one’s experience. While the danger is allowing truth to be redefined by one’s experience, the strength of the postmodern perspective


¹⁵²Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church, 219.
allows believers to revisit truths of the Bible as their experience gives rise to new questions. When these believers allow the Bible to answer these questions, they have the opportunity to allow truths within Scripture to speak to their experience. By doing so, they inevitably learn the importance of living out an incarnational witness who knows and shows biblical truth.
Subjectivity of Truth in the Person of Christ

While Carson grounds truth in Scripture, McLaren looks for another source since his postmodern epistemology requires him to build a relationship with God apart from certainty regarding any revelation or theology within Scripture. Ultimately, he chooses to focus on his subjective experience of God apart from constraints within divine revelation. As McLaren states, “the highest revelation of God . . . comes to [people] not in pages but in a person, not in words on paper, but in the word of God made flesh.”

McLaren is not saying Jesus can be known apart from Scripture; rather, he argues that emphasis should be placed on the “first-coming Jesus” of the Gospels who did not exclude anyone. By starting with Jesus in the Gospels, McLaren teaches that one will end up with a different understanding of the Bible than if one begins with the Bible as a whole in all its contents.

As subjective Truth, Jesus, according to McLaren, is the only way to God. He also believes Jesus is Truth meaning that He is “reality” and has nothing false about

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154 Ibid.

155 Ibid.

Him. McLaren agrees that Jesus is Life; in other words, He possesses “fullness of life” and relationship with God can only occur through Him. McLaren later mentions that people who have fullness of life live according to Christ’s intentions, in other words, obey Christ. Obeying Christ, however, produces a bit of a quandary since Christ Himself is the subjective version of truth and knowledge of His person cannot be attained with certainty, especially since proclaiming certainty about God, in McLaren’s view, is “absurd and maybe a little blasphemous.” The objective version, along with certainty that it provides, remains to be found as one engages in a search for it because Jesus’ invitation into the Kingdom of God, McLaren believes, came “as a secret hidden in a parable, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a seed hidden in soil, like yeast hidden in dough.”

**Embodiment of Scripture**

McLaren’s approach does not deny the presence of objective truths concerning God’s nature; it denies their accessibility and simply encourages learning more about God through stories and encountering the subjective God as a subject. According to

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157 Ibid.

158 Ibid.

159 Ibid., 87-88.


McLaren, “[T]he ultimate ongoing embodiment of [Jesus] is in the stories of [Christians’] lives, woven together in communities of faith, hope, love, and mission.” The core and seemingly only clear teaching of Christianity, according to McLaren, is Christ Himself “[a]nd not just a facet of Christ or an idea about Christ, not just a theory about Christ’s birth or death or resurrection or teaching or deity or humanity.” McLaren’s discussion of embodiment of Scripture in Christ indicates a typical preference among some emerging church proponents, according to DeVine, to speak of embodying truth as a means of uniting theology and action in Christian lives.

McLaren’s view on the embodiment of Scripture is similar to perspectives of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner who both perceive divine revelation in Scripture as a personal encounter between God and people instead of propositional revelation. According to Barth, “[T]he truth of a doctrinal proposition . . ., the possibility of a purely theoretical attitude to it and the idea objectively answering to this possibility of a purely material, impersonal presence of truth in the proposition, . . . makes the equation of veritas revelata and the doctrinal prospect suspect.” Likewise, Brunner rejects

163 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 210.
164 Leonard Sweet et.al., The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 200.
propositional truth as an “inadequate way” to think about God in favor of simply thinking about Him in terms of a personal encounter.\textsuperscript{167}

Following Barth and Brunner, Grenz places the “essence of Christianity” in the encounter between God and humanity because “[k]nowledge of God is personal in the sense that it transcends the plane of objects.”\textsuperscript{168} In response, Ronald H. Nash and Paul Helm reject as false any disjunction between propositional and personal revelation because divine revelation is informative revelation about God’s person.\textsuperscript{169} Harold A. Netland adds that people can only “appropriate” information about God if they accept it “as true in a nonpersonalistic or propositional sense.”\textsuperscript{170}

\textbf{Rejection of Modern Theology}

Despite McLaren’s admission of having been influenced to some degree by some theologians in the modern era, he still prefers to condemn their work en masse. Theology in the modern era, McLaren contends, created a distorted view of God as “objective, detached, sanitized of subjectivity, [and] removed from the variable of


\textsuperscript{168}Stanley J. Grenz and Robert E. Olson, 20\textsuperscript{th} \textit{Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age} (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 79-80.


personal relationship.” 171 David J. Hesselgrave agrees with what McLaren implies can happen, that those who maintain a modern epistemology will by default manifest a “bias against direct divine intervention in human affairs.” 172 To avoid such a bias, Hesselgrave believes the Bible should be viewed as a repository of divinely revealed truth that can be understood as such by people, a contention McLaren himself stands firmly against and a contention that is absolutely necessary to establish a relationship with God which McLaren desires. 173

McLaren’s close association of modernism and objectivity, which assumes that all those living during the Enlightenment were trapped in modern worldview, is criticized by Carson who reminds McLaren of the work of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom place one’s mind at a disjunction with objective reality. 174 Gregory Wills offers a different critique of McLaren by accusing him of being a closet modernist because he objects to biblical narrative on moral grounds which means he believes that there is a right morality. 175 Wills may be correct because McLaren, after a time of doubt and search, does come to believe what he calls the gospel of the Kingdom of God as an objective fact. While he will likely respond to such criticism that he is simply affirming his trust in that particular narrative, his consistent downplaying of other interpretations

171 McLaren and Campolo, Adventures in Missing the Point, 238.
173 Ibid., 41.
174 Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church, 59.
175 Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”
(especially those offered by exclusivists) suggests otherwise. Concerning the interpretation of exclusivists, McLaren does admit his belief that it produces bad results and changing these results will likely require a change in theology.\textsuperscript{176}

Carson offers further criticism for emergents like McLaren who condemn modernism: He calls their argumentation “theologically shallow because it overlooks the basic fact that no worldview, no epistemological system developed by [people] in this fallen world, is entirely good or entirely bad” and “intellectually incoherent because . . . most emergent publications go out of their way to find good things about every other ‘ism.’”\textsuperscript{177} McLaren, for example, finds “wonderful and insightful” content in Islam and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{178}

McLaren argues that God and Christ are Subjects and therefore any attempts to study Him objectively become a failed assignment because inevitably parts of His being will be overlooked.\textsuperscript{179} McLaren states,

For Christians, objectivity is never the last word, because behind all objects there is always a Subject, God, who is not only the ultimate Subject, but is also the Personal Subject. If this is true, then nothing in the universe is purely objective; . . . The very concepts ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ are unbiblical categories, for in the Scriptures there is always subject-object interaction.\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{176}Brian McLaren, 360 Theology, Faithworks 2010 [MP3].

\textsuperscript{177}Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church, 68-69.

\textsuperscript{178}McLaren, New Kind of Christian, 62.

\textsuperscript{179}McLaren and Campolo, Adventures in Missing the Point, 238.

\textsuperscript{180}Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 163.
McLaren’s emphasis on relationship is commendable according to Charles Colson who says, “truth becomes relational when [people] come to Jesus, Truth [H]imself,” but then he adds that Jesus remains truth whether one comes to Him or not.¹⁸¹

In contrast to McLaren’s rejection of reason as a necessary tool for understanding meaning, D. Elton Trueblood has argued reason is absolutely vital when interpreting God’s Word because lack thereof leads to an endless myriad of mutually exclusive truth claims, a clear violation of the law of noncontradiction, and an extension of equal status to all truth claims, even those considered non-Christian traditionally.¹⁸² Reason allows a person to identify the validity of any given truth claim and to make a distinction between valid truth claims and competing claims.

**Biblical Response to the Subjectivity of Christ**

Martin Downes also objects to McLaren’s view of Christ as a Subject who cannot be known objectively:

> How can [people] speak of Christ apart from what [they] know about [H]im? The Christ [people] are meant to know and who saves [them] is never an ‘uninterpreted Christ.’ He is either rightly interpreted or wrongly interpreted. How can [H]e be the object of saving faith unless [people] know things about who he is and what he accomplished? A false faith would be faith placed in a wrongly interpreted Christ. Isn’t that Paul’s point about super apostles in 2 Corinthians 11?¹⁸³

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¹⁸¹Charles Colson, “Emerging Confusion: Jesus is the Truth whether We Experience Him or Not,” Christianity Today (June 2006): 72.

¹⁸²D. Elton Trueblood, Philosophy of Religion (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 32.

Paul distinguishes between true and false gospel accounts of Christ and expects Corinthians to make a correct determination (2 Cor 11:1-15). In Matthew 5:17-48, Jesus corrected false interpretations and expected His followers to obey right interpretations of His Word (cf. Mark 12:24). In Acts 15, the Apostles decided on a correct interpretation and application on biblical teaching concerning circumcision. In Acts 18:25-26, Apollos is said to be teaching “accurately” and Priscilla and Aquila are even able to insist in developing a correct interpretation of Scripture which, by implication, means they had access to it themselves. Peter, John, and Paul were so certain that their gospel was correct that they even condemn those who present false gospels.\footnote{2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1-6; Gal 2:4; 1 Tim 1:3-4; 6:20.}

Paul even commends Bereans for turning to Scripture (and not their subjective view of God) to determine the accuracy of his preaching: “[T]he Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Bereans agreed with Michael Horton: “The only way to have access to this person is through the message. Whether [people] like it or not . . ., gospel means ‘good news, a message. It is by definition a message. But of course Jesus is [H]imself the good news incarnate, so it’s both.”\footnote{Sweet et.al., The Church in Emerging Culture, 248.} John Bolt agrees with Downes and Horton, “Theology is about the knowledge of God. However, because of whom God is and because of human limitation, God must make [H]imself known to [people. They] cannot do without revelation, a self-disclosure from God [H]imself.”\footnote{John Bolt, “Sola Scriptura as an Evangelical Theological Method?,” in}
willing to agree that God has revealed Himself in Scripture to humanity, but humanity is incapable of receiving revelation with certainty. With this in mind, McLaren reconstructs his theology according to his postmodern epistemology.

**Postmodern Reconstruction of Theology**

To accomplish his reconstruction of theology, McLaren develops an experiential approach to Scripture where God and His revealed Word are permanently separated due to his understanding of epistemology. Since these two are no longer connected, humanity becomes independent from God and His Word and free to choose their theologies for themselves based on their individual experiences. The end result, as Griffin observes, may be a naturalistic view of God where both He and His creation (as a whole and in parts) have the capacity to influence the world independently even while they remain interdependent. With a naturalistic view, God cannot serve as judge to the world because anything He says cannot be known with certainty; rather, He simply becomes relegated to restoring His creation due to His interconnectedness with it.

**Subjugation of Scripture to the Person of Christ**

McLaren, who appears to be moving toward a naturalistic view of God, separates words within Scriptures from God as divine Author and elevates actions and experiences of the biblical authors to the authoritative role in interpretation of the biblical text. Kevin J. Vanhoozer develops a similar approach to theological construction which emphasizes a postmodern disdain for propositions and favors actions represented by

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words in the Bible. This postconservative view of Scripture favors actions of God more than words of God as inspired. By removing adherence to ancient tradition, Christians may then readopt *sola scriptura*, but when they do so, they acknowledge that construction of theologies, which is constantly bombarded with reinterpretations, will be an ongoing task.

McLaren applies Vanhoozer’s approach to the “role and work of prophets” (the experience of Old Testament prophets) to inform his interpretation of Christ’s work because he believes language employed by biblical prophets conceals truth and allows only interpretations of “prophetic action” to inform one’s experience:

When [people] see the cross as prophetic action, God emerges not as a distant judge transacting legal pardon from a detached distance, but rather as a passionately involved advocate profoundly identifies with [them], weeping with [them] in radical empathy, sharing [their] grief, entering [their] shame. . . . This way of seeing God more fully honors Jesus as Word of God, . . ., Jesus speaking God, not just speaking of God or about God or for God, but speaking God in word and deed.

By emphasizing Christ’s actions during His earthly life, McLaren rejects views that say God is a condemning judge as being Western creation in favor of “the Jewish ancient understanding” of a judge that seeks justice for oppressed people and not

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187 Griffin, “Postmodern Theology and A/theology,” 48–49.


condemnation. In response, Carson might accuse McLaren of making a fallacious argument because McLaren is making “the assumption that any language so constrains the thinking processes of the people who use it that they are forced into certain patterns of thought and shielded from others. Language and mentality thus become confused.”

By confusing language and mental processes employed in knowledge formation, McLaren fails to address contemporary approaches that combine these two such as the “hermeneutical spiral, the pairing of ‘distanciation’ and ‘fusion of horizons,’ and asymptomatic approaches to knowledge.” Carson argues that ‘distanciation’ and ‘fusion of horizons,’ when paired together, incorporate the best of postmodernism and deconstruction while avoiding relativism. Taken together, biblical context gradually influences readers and draws them from their particular context and causes their understanding to fuse with biblical teaching. The second hermeneutical approach, proffered by Carson is the asymptomatic approach which basically argues that people can develop a conclusive, though not exhaustive, understanding of truth. The third, the hermeneutical spiral, simply adds to the asymptomatic approach the idea that conclusive knowledge of Scripture will develop over time through intensive study of its contents.

Instead of embracing more conservative hermeneutical approaches outlined by Carson, McLaren develops an approach to Scripture that exalts subjectivity of God and downplays objectivity. While most conservatives will agree that God’s personal

190 McLaren, “Reverend Brian McLaren NSP Speech.”

191 Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, 44.


revelation of Himself was increasingly revealed as new books were added to the Bible, McLaren maintains God’s “ultimate revelation” is Christ and not the Bible.\(^{194}\) While at first subjugation of God’s Word in favor of the person of Christ may seem acceptable, one should remember that the Bible is the only divinely inspired source for knowing the person of Christ. Christ, therefore, can only be known through Scripture. By viewing Scripture as mere human attempts to understand the person of Christ, McLaren ends up teaching that Christ is ultimately unknowable.

Another problem presents itself when God’s revelation is subjugated to the person of Christ.\(^{195}\) This view of Scripture has some parallels with Marcion, who affirmed the OT as a true, undermined revelatory authority of the OT (in its presentation of God), “acknowledged as valid only Paul . . . and identified his gospel with . . . Luke, [which was] now purged of its Judaistic interpolations.”\(^{196}\) While McLaren does not affirm Marcion’s views on the OT, his elevation of Christ above Scripture in relation to his hermeneutic can certainly lead him or others to any number of views of God, distance themselves absolutely from their” context.

\(^{194}\)McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 116.


especially since he believes “Romans is the wrong place to go to get a definition of the gospel.”

**Rejection of God’s Self-Revelation**

Not only does McLaren elevate Christ above the biblical text, he also employs the idea of progressive revelation with a postmodern twist by not only recognizing that God’s self-revelation unfolds over history through biblical revelation but also these newer revelations can then replace older revelations. McLaren’s version of progressive revelation is clearly demonstrated in his treatment of Noah’s flood. Instead of affirming the more traditional view of God as Judge, McLaren prefers to see the biblical account of Noah’s flood as the best attempt of its human authors to describe their experience.

In response, Bruce Ware argues that McLaren “sees the God of the Bible and despises that God; so what he does is create God in a whole different image, an image that really does reflect the values of McLaren, of a postmodern, left . . . evangelical, left political climate and culture.”

God, in McLaren’s view of Noah’s flood, should be seen “not simply as the real God, but a character in a story, seen and described unapologetically from a human point of view. This character is thus rendered in starkly

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199 Ibid., 110.

200 Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”
human terms, which excuses the character for displaying less emotional maturity than we might expect in an actual deity.”

The actual deity, in McLaren’s view, is the God of Jesus who is a loving, compassionate God as opposed to a God who condemns and judges the world with finality. He writes, “God coming as Judge . . . means . . . He is going to expose unjust people, . . . side with the oppressed, . . bring compassion to those who have been oppressed, and . . . stop the plans of evildoers and unjust people.” McLaren affirms the OT but rejects any interpretation that presents God as violent. He associates a violent God with Greco-Roman philosophers and “the compassionate God of justice proclaimed by the prophets” with the God of Abraham. McLaren develops his view by saying “the wrath of God [is] . . . a dimension of [His] love” that is “not destructive, but restorative.” To this end, “the nonviolent Jesus of the [G]ospels presents a nonviolent image of God.” To support his contention, McLaren sides with “increasing numbers of biblical scholars who suggest that Revelation, as an example of Jewish apocalyptic

201 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 268.
202 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 166.
204 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 65.
literature, was not intended as a prognostication about the end of the world but rather as an unveiling of the real meaning behind events in the time of its original readers.”

Since McLaren ascribes truth to events recorded in the Bible and not to words penned by fallible human authors, he presents Scripture as the best attempts of the human authors to capture God’s character which became more correct with each new additional work to the Bible and then expunges those passages in the Bible which portray God as “competitive, superficially exacting, exclusive, deterministic, and violent.” In response, Ware suggests that McLaren’s understanding of the biblical authors renders them incapable of rationality in their writings. McLaren’s focus on human authorship of Scripture with little credit given to work of the Holy Spirit through human authors in the Bible’s composition does not find support in Scripture. Paul and Peter both affirm the Holy Spirit’s work in the writing of Scripture through His inspiration of human authors which resulted in the Bible’s inerrancy and infallibility. McLaren, however, rejects biblical inerrancy in favor of what he calls the inherency view of Scripture which

\[\text{\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.}\]


\[\text{\textsuperscript{209} Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{210} Mark 12:36; 1 Cor 14:37; Gal 1:15-16; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21; 3:15-16.}\]
positions God’s Word within Scripture but prevents God’s meaning from being determined conclusively because of human fallibility.\textsuperscript{211}

\textit{Elevation of Culture}

Because of fallibility of the Bible’s human authorship and fallibility of human interpretations, each culture is free to develop any number of interpretations of God’s Word without fear of condemnation. Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper argue that culture has always been a part of doctrinal formulations and therefore all doctrines need to be reassessed.\textsuperscript{212} Gibbs takes a similar stance: “No church is above culture. It is as much shaped by the culture in which it is birthed as by the gospel that it seeks to live by and proclaim to the world.”\textsuperscript{213} McLaren argues that “culture desperately needs the church” and “the church desperately needs the culture” so that they may follow the self-giving way of Christ.\textsuperscript{214} The close association between culture and church informs Gibbs’ understanding of McLaren:

A missional engagement requires immersion in culture, to listen and ask questions. A missionary then proposes responses from the gospel, rather than attempting to impose a message. Postmoderns, who are anti-absolutist, suspicious of truth claims, and wide open to relativism, will pose new and discomforting questions. Emerging

\textsuperscript{211}Further discussion on McLaren’s Inherency View of Scripture can be found in Appendix 5.

\textsuperscript{212}Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper, \textit{Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 28. McLaren offers critical praise for this book inside its cover.


\textsuperscript{214}McLaren, \textit{Contagious Spirituality – Session 2}, track 3.
leaders [like McLaren] are immersed in these oceans, rather than occasionally visiting or examining them in the laboratories of evangelical academia.\footnote{Eddie Gibbs, “Emerging Solutions— and Problems: D. A. Carson’s Theological Analysis of Brian McLaren, Et Al,” 
*Christianity Today* (October 2005): 93-95.}

Gibbs’ assessment of postmodernism is correct, but his lack of condemnation in regard to McLaren’s gospel response which affirms postmodern epistemology may cause concern among many evangelicals. McLaren certainly is immersed in postmodern culture, but his gospel avoids affirmations of much of its propositional content.

Each culture, McLaren teaches, develops their own understanding of the gospel with the Holy Spirit’s assistance despite their consistent “failure to hear and respond.”\footnote{Brian McLaren “Q & R: Was the Spirit Guiding?,” (18 January, 2011) [online]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-was-the-spirit-guiding.html; Internet. McLaren believes that God’s Spirit is incapable of helping humanity arrive at a perfect understanding of His Word.}

Franke, who agrees with McLaren, puts it this way, “Neither gospel nor culture can function as the primary entity in the conversation between the two in light of their interpretive and constructed nature; [one] must recognize that theology emerges through an ongoing conversation involving both gospel and culture.”\footnote{John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), 103.}


Bosch criticized most missionaries in the Enlightenment years for intertwining their own cultures in their gospel presentations.\footnote{David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995),}
Based on his research of missionary endeavors, Bosch concludes that “the gospel always comes to people in cultural robes” and culture can make “a positive contribution to other societies.”

Newbigin believes both givers and receivers of the gospel have a blurred understanding of its true nature and together they can help each other arrive at a more correct understanding. Their understanding is blurred by difficulty if not impossibility of human language to convey and receive truth clearly as well as cultural differences between communicator and receptor. To overcome this difficulty, Newbigin argues that the Bible becomes “an independent source of criticism directed both against the Christianity of the missionaries and against the traditional culture” with the end result being both “complicated and unpredictable.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, condemns such a disjunction because “[t]he human mind can no more cease to think systematically than it can cease to think.” McLaren, however, argues that postmodernists prefer not to have the Bible delivered to them in the form of propositions derived from its contents.

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220 Ibid., 297.


223 Ibid., 147-48.


225 McLaren, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” interview by R. Alan Street,
Given their preference, McLaren is willing to construct a new theology that appeals to their postmodern worldview.

McLaren accords human cultures a higher place than God and His revealed Word by redirecting previously held views (like those of the Reformers) on the biblical message toward views that are more appropriate for the current postmodern culture. His emphasis on postmodern culture leads him to allow culture to reshape his gospel beyond forgiveness of sins to include “justice, compassion, sacrifice, purpose, transformation into Christlikeness, and ultimate hope.” As he allows culture to reshape his gospel, he is willing to listen to many voices from within many different cultures.

Franke, who draws McLaren’s support, calls these voices a “plurality of truth” which, when applied to Scripture, causes “[t]heology to be situated and contextual” because “[n]o single community, tradition, or perspective can speak for the whole church.”

Since McLaren’s postmodern epistemology ultimately prevents him from discerning which of these voices is correct, the task of determining exact meaning of the Bible and whether or not the theology that results from the conversation is actually Christian in nature becomes complicated. McLaren is wise to listen to other voices to

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226 McLaren, Reinventing Your Church, 65.
227 Sweet et al., Church in Emerging Culture, 212.
inform his interpretation, but absence of a firmly held biblical foundation may lead him to diminish or even deny revealed truth in Scripture. For churches, the consequence for placing postmodern culture equal to and above the gospel may be corrosion of essential components of the gospel especially since McLaren suggests a postmodernism that removes “confidence in the human ability to know truth in any objective way” and deconstructs theology.\(^{230}\) Embracing his own suggestion, he admits being “wrong about many things, although [he is] not sure exactly which things [he is] wrong about. [He is] even sure [he is] wrong about what [he] think[s he is] right about in at least some cases.”\(^{231}\) Despite his obvious predicament, he still believes that a new theology is possible once the boundary of postmodernism is crossed.\(^{232}\)

In response, Keith E. Eitel says that absence of “biblically firm boundaries will result in compromises that undermine the message [Christians] have to offer to the world.”\(^{233}\) Since McLaren believes boundaries for “what’s right,” “what’s true,” “what’s wrong,” and “what’s false” are a matter of ongoing search and interpretation, Eitel’s concern may end up being an inevitable result.\(^{234}\) With no way to establish truth and

\(^{230}\) McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church*, 68.


\(^{232}\) McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church*, 68.


construct a theology, the gospel ends up being determined by postmodern preference for subjective experience of the community.

**Dependence on Communal Interpretation**

Since humanity is fallible, McLaren rejects the modernist approach to Scripture which depended, in his opinion, too heavily on individuals in favor of an ongoing communal interpretation. McLaren admits modernism helped improve upon some previously held views of God yet still has failed to comprehend God fully. God, in the minds of modernists as McLaren suggests, is rigid, clearly understandable, and exclusive and His followers are “judgmental, arrogant, and close-minded.” This understanding of God, in McLaren’s view, can only lead to disunity and therefore must be rejected in favor of an understanding that promotes unity.

**Relational Unity**

According to McLaren, the God of postmodernism, is incomprehensible, personal, relational, non-judgmental, loving, and inclusive and his followers are “compassionate, humble, and teachable.” To promote inclusivity, McLaren believes churches should offer “mysteries” which promote questions as opposed to answers,

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236 Ibid., 63-64.

237 McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 222-23; idem, “A Little Bit of Unity and Communion Today” [on-line]; accessed 24 March 2011; available from http://www.briannmclaren.net/archives/blog/a-little-bit-of-unity-and-commun.html; Internet. To restore unity to the church, McLaren redefines “holy” based on devotion “to a sacred purpose” as opposed to particular behaviors. This unity requires a postmodern epistemology that denies any definitive truth statements.

238 McLaren, *More Ready than You Realize*, 63-64.
satisfaction, and respect for those of other faiths.\textsuperscript{239} Along with mysteries, postmodern reconstruction of theology requires an ongoing dialogue with all potential contributors who may have “new theological ideas . . . deserve to be first heard, and then tested, sifted, [and] considered carefully.”\textsuperscript{240} Through question and dialogue, McLaren’s postmodern theology invites people to participate in the divine narrative wherein one interacts with the story of Christ in Scripture.\textsuperscript{241}

Since God, in McLaren’s opinion, is “incomprehensible” due to the fallibility of human intellect, he contends that all versions (including his own) of Christianity, except the one “in the mind of God,” are marred in some way due to human inability to know truth definitively.\textsuperscript{242} This postmodern epistemology causes a more open and humble faith that encourages doubt, refuses to condemn other positions, and elevates experience in the quest for truth.\textsuperscript{243} With experience becoming the arbiter of truth, McLaren is developing a Christianity that he believes is more relational in nature. Raschke argues that “[r]elational Christianity is postmodern Christianity.”\textsuperscript{244} Philip Jenkins points out Christianity is becoming more relational as forces of globalization are

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{239} McLaren, \textit{Reinventing Your Church}, 77-80.
\item \textsuperscript{240} McLaren and Campolo, \textit{Adventures in Missing the Point}, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{241} Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, \textit{A is for Abductive}, 233-34.
\item \textsuperscript{242} McLaren, \textit{Reinventing Your Church}, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 180-81.
\item \textsuperscript{244} Carl Raschke, \textit{GloboChrist: The Great Commission Takes a Postmodern Turn}, The Church and Postmodern Culture, ed. James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 20.
\end{itemize}
bringing people from a vast array of cultures and religious faiths into close proximity with one another.\textsuperscript{245}

The trend of the postmodern Christian witness toward a more relational approach is somewhat paradoxical to the approach of Enlightenment thinkers who, according to Eitel, tended to view people more objectively thus “render[ing] humankind empty, with a lack of eternal significance.”\textsuperscript{246} In response to emptiness felt by people in the wake of the Enlightenment, Eitel observes that people began to form a postmodern view of humanity which promotes all aspects of their being instead of simply trying to conform them to some logical construct.\textsuperscript{247} By taking a new view to humanity, postmodernists began to emphasize importance of community which led to formation of a more communal approach to others.\textsuperscript{248} A communal approach involves mutual respect between people and a willingness to reconsider traditional thought constructs.\textsuperscript{249}

Raschke, who echoes the viewpoint of many postmodernists, is wary of those Christians who focus too heavily on doctrines while at the same time neglecting the application of those truths to their actions and behaviors.\textsuperscript{250} Christianity, Raschke would argue, should no longer supply the world just with “truth that stands by itself” because

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{245}Philip Jenkins, \textit{The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.
\item \textsuperscript{247}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{248}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{249}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{250}Raschke, \textit{Globo Christ}, 117-18.
\end{itemize}
the postmodernists, unlike modernists, give little credence to logical arguments based on propositional truths; rather, postmodernists want to experience truths of Christianity in their relationship with active Christians who are living out their beliefs.\textsuperscript{251} McLaren, who agrees with Rashke, states in an interview with Frost that he believes in propositional truths but then says that divine truth “can never be limited to propositions—it always is expressed in incarnation and action and relationships as well.”\textsuperscript{252} According to F. LeRon Shults, emerging leaders like McLaren use propositional truth to “serve the process of inquiry rather than shut it down.”\textsuperscript{253}

\textbf{Cultural-Linguistic Approach to Scripture}

For those who continue to adhere to systematic theologies, Grenz charges them with syncretization with modernism (rationalism) and individualism by isolating propositions from the biblical text and thereby stripping them of their communal context: “Evangelicals are correct in asserting that the revealed truth of God forms the ‘basic grammar’ that creates Christian identity. . . . But this identity-creative process is not an individualistic matter occurring in isolation. Instead, it is a development that happens within a community.”\textsuperscript{254} For Grenz, authority no longer lies in divine revelation (even though he affirms the Bible to be so) but in “paradigmatic events” within the “biblical...

\textsuperscript{251}Ibid., 118.

\textsuperscript{252}McLaren, Pagitt, and Stetzer, “A Snapshot of the Emergent Church,” 21-22.


\textsuperscript{254}Stanley J. Grenz, \textit{Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century} (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1993), 73.
narrative” and “their use in the community of faith as set forth in the Bible.” With this view, theological constructions become trapped in communal reflection leading to a form of religious pluralism.

According to Newbigin, these communal reflections, also known as stories, are based on the person of Jesus and not on objective truth claims. Therefore, “There are only stories, and the Christian story is one among them.” To help determine which story is authoritative, Grenz and Franke appeal to a “speech-act theory [to] suggest that the Bible is the instrumentality of the Spirit, in that the Spirit appropriates the biblical text in order to address the Christian community through the ages.”

A. B. Caneday, who offers an in-depth criticism of Grenz and Franke’s view, suggests that they misrepresent “language games” proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who discovered a philosophical relationship between meaning and context, in favor of that proffered by Lindbeck. Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic approach” to Scripture perceives that its meaning is controlled by the community in which doctrine is generated, and therefore, its contemporary meaning remains permanently obscured as each


257 Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 24; Brian McLaren, “Q & R: The Pluralism Question” (26 October 2010) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://briannmclaren.net/archives/blog/in-short-many-of-your.html; Internet. Despite McLaren’s support for Grenz and Franke, he still remains unsure if the idea that “all religions are OK” is fallacious.

community develops its own doctrines. With this approach, *sola scriptura* is supplanted by tradition as the foundation of doctrines.

Since various traditions may develop truths that oppose one another, one possible result of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach is pluralism. To avoid such an outcome, Lindbeck suggests that theologies are merely “language games” because “doctrines are second-order guidelines for Christian discourse rather than first-order affirmations about the inner being of God or of Jesus Christ.”

Doctrines become “sets of rules for proper, culturally literate first-order religious speech” which are unique to a given community. McLaren supports Lindbeck’s view when he rejects “the assumption that [the Bible] describes a changeless, timeless system, more like the Platonic ideal” and prefers “the assumption that it describes a story, a narrative.”

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hermeneutic is basically the same approach employed by Newbigin who also calls Christ’s message a story as opposed to a “timeless, eternal truth.”

**Narrative Hermeneutical Approach to Scripture**

As one interacts with the story of Christ in Scripture, all doctrines will need to be reconnected to the biblical story by demonstrating how and in what context they were developed, controversies that have been associated with these doctrines, and any and all opposing views. McLaren’s view of the Bible as a story may have arisen at least in part from Newbigin’s *Proper Confidence*. In his book, Newbigin argues that truth cannot be known objectively; rather, truth must be accepted by faith through an ongoing narrative which includes actions of both God and humanity.

**Rejection of Systematic Theology**

McLaren, who connects objectivity with modernism, decries any reductionistic efforts that seek to analyze the Bible, understand its contents, develop doctrinal positions, and make applications because modernistic approaches fail to ask “holistic questions” concerning biblical culture, common themes, uniqueness of each biblical author, etc.

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264 McLaren, *More Ready than You Realize*, 33. After making this suggestion, he admits that such complexity is not necessary or helpful in the initial evangelistic efforts.


contrast to modernists, postmodernists read the Bible as a story that poses questions to readers. Therefore, McLaren prefers narrative and dialogical theologies over systematic theologies because systematic theologies attempt to simplify truth instead of allowing it to remain complex: “It’s interesting that systematic theology tends to work by analysis - breaking wholes down into parts. Narrative theology looks for patterns of plot, intention, and mission that unite parts into new wholes. So does a dialogical approach - that looks for statements and counterstatements in an ongoing search for truth and understanding.”

McLaren’s motive for his massive reconstruction of theologies is his belief that previous theologies overlook simple elements of the faith which he believes exist throughout God’s creation. In addition, these systematic theologies also downplay context, in McLaren’s opinion, even while they employ terminology that is foreign to Scripture:

[T]heology is divided up into many other ‘ologies’: soteriology, hamartiology, eschatology, and so on. It’s a dissection of God—a ‘theosection.’ It strikes [him] how rare these kinds of words, outlines, and dissective ways of thinking are in the Bible, which preoccupies itself with earthy stories rather than airy abstractions, wild poetry rather than tidy systems, personal and contextual letters rather than timeless, absolute pronouncements or propositions.

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268 McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 57-58. He says *lectio divina* is similar practice.


McLaren’s overarching concern with context is due to his uncertainty regarding its message. Steve Strauss, however, warns, “To suggest that theology varies according to cultural and historical contexts seems to introduce a dangerous element of relativism that contradicts the certainties and absoluteness of Scripture.” Strauss agrees with McLaren that theology occurs in the midst of ongoing cultural changes and then offers a translation model for contextual theology that begins with an affirmation of *sola scriptura*. Strauss develops his model based on intrinsic testimony within Scripture about itself. McLaren, however, is forced to find a model that allows for cultural changes because of his denial of *sola scriptura*. Since the Bible itself is insufficient, in his opinion, for constructing theology, McLaren prefers ongoing dialogue and conversation with others about the Bible.


273 Ibid., 100-101. Strauss understands that contextual theologians who view context as their primary source end up with a myriad of possible translation of Scripture. Such a result defies the law of noncontradiction and replaces it with relativism.

274 McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 92. McLaren denies sola scriptura and prefers to view the Bible as a participant in an ongoing quest for that which is truth: “Does the Bible alone provide enough clarity to resolve all questions, as a good constitution should? No. We have no reason to believe it was ever meant to do that, as much as we’ve tried to force it to do so. From all sides it becomes clear that the Bible, if it is truly inspired by God, wasn’t meant to end conversation and give the final word on controversies. If this were it’s purpose, it has failed miserably. (This fact must be faced) But if, instead, it was inspired and intended to stimulate conversation, to keep people thinking and talking and arguing and seeking, across continents and centuries, it has succeeded and is succeeding in a truly remarkable way.”
Scripture in Conversation

Instead of firmly holding to particular theologies, McLaren encourages people to read the Bible from multiple vantage points not to eliminate possible interpretations but so as to appreciate the Bible “as being multifaceted and multidimensional and therefore wonderful.”\(^{275}\) Along with many possible interpretations, the Bible “regularly offers multiple perspectives on the same events, some positive, some negative, which together give us a truer assessment than a single dualist judgment would.”\(^{276}\) According to McLaren, “[T]he Bible does not expect [people] . . . to figure everything out alone. It assumes that there is a community that passes down the art of biblical literacy from generation to generation.”\(^{277}\)

One’s spiritual community, according to McLaren, is tasked with the burden of assisting people in making sense of the Bible and its relationship to contemporary culture: “[P]art of spiritual friendship is helping people put together a worldview, a web or mosaic of belief, a pattern that makes sense.”\(^{278}\) McLaren advocates building unity and consensus around biblical views that are “clear and compelling without debate.”\(^{279}\) To build consensus, a deconstructionist, like McLaren, prefers to hear any and all possible interpretations, not to mention future interpretations, in hope that these will help

\(^{275}\)Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 265-66.


\(^{277}\)McLaren, More Ready than You Realize, 77.

\(^{278}\)Ibid., 114.

\(^{279}\)McLaren, Finding Faith, 243.
further enlighten him as to the text’s true meaning. The reason for his appeal to interpretations of the broader community for construction of theologies is his rejection of history and scientific observation as a possible means for developing correct doctrinal formulations in favor of those truths considered by the “believing community” to be consequential and inspiring. Here, McLaren follows Grenz and Franke who recenter the community of God around a shared experience of God or “an encounter of God in Christ.”

For those who are seeking such an encounter, McLaren wishes to help them engage in dialogue and conversation as a means of finding answers themselves. Instead of making dogmatic statements about biblical teaching, seekers who are considering Christianity should attempt to discover these truths for themselves in their various conversations with any and all who care to converse with them. These conversations also include the Bible as a full partner and contributor to the discussion:

Scripture is a given. It’s the norming norm for Christian thinking. [People] can throw it out when it bothers [them] if [they] want to, but then [they] have no guarantee that what [they]’ll end up with can truly be called Christian. So Scripture must never be thrown out, never minimized; it must be a respected member of any conversation. Or perhaps it actually brings many voices to the table.

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280 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 88.
282 Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism, 48.
284 McLaren, Last Word and the Word after that, 41-43; McLaren, A New Kind of Christianity, 83-84; Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, Church Re-Imagined, 115. Pagitt also believes Scripture is a participant in a conversation.
McLaren appreciates all interpretations as contributors to ongoing conversations about the Bible because its exact meaning remains hidden due to its complexity, ambiguity, and paradox within the Bible. The presumed obscurity of the Bible’s meaning leads McLaren to seek truth in dialogue and conversation thus avoiding reductionism. This approach, however, relegates the Bible to the status of participant in open-ended dialogues about its contents because emerging writers, like Rollins, reject any given interpretation. McLaren’s preference for ascertaining the meaning of Scripture from conversations of others about the Scripture arises from his mistrust in the individual’s ability to discover textual meaning. In response to the idea of making the Bible merely a participant in a larger discussion, Hesselgrave warns that such an approach, though very appealing to individualistic mindsets of Americans in general, may cause participants to infer their own meanings on the biblical text when such meanings are not warranted by careful exegesis.

As a member of the conversation, McLaren refuses to allow Scripture to be used to interpret itself; therefore, understanding its contents requires an unending stream

285 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 198.

286 Peter Rollins, The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2008), 125; Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren talks with Peter Rollins,” (5 December 2008), video [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbqKWvDdM0I; Internet. In this video, McLaren recommends Rollins’ book. In the video, Rollins says he prefers parables because they speak to the heart and translate to action. McLaren says, “Fiction can be so much more truthful than . . . nonfiction.”

287 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 91.

of interpretations derived from everyone’s unique experiences which contribute to conversations about its meaning.\textsuperscript{289} Using McLaren’s approach to Scripture, Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes reject the idea that Scripture alone should be used to interpret Scripture because they believe such an approach requires a literal reading of the text and therefore elevates “[t]he violence of the book of Joshua” to the same level as “the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount.”\textsuperscript{290} Instead, they propose “[t]he sacrament of dialogue” where opinions of the church community help individuals develop understanding of the Bible even while these individuals will never be able to ascertain “ethical absolutes.”\textsuperscript{291} According to Brewin, searching for truth through experiences of and within one’s community is a primary characteristic of emergent churches because emergents believe that conception of truth is in a constant state of flux, a condition which prevents formation of theologies.\textsuperscript{292}

\textit{Rejection of Sola Scriptura}

Emerging dependence on conversation, as previously mentioned, arises from a rejection of \textit{sola scriptura} in formulation of doctrines because any and all doctrines depend on human interpretation, which by default is less than absolutely reliable. To overcome any possibility of wrong interpretations, Oden gives precedence to

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\textsuperscript{289} McLaren, \textit{Last Word and the Word after that}, 42.

\textsuperscript{290} Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, \textit{Free for All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 56-57.

\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., 176, 186.

\textsuperscript{292} Brewin, \textit{Signs of Emergence}, 110.
“universality, apostolic antiquity, and conciliar consent.” In response, Roger E. Olson argues that Oden has placed final authority in ancient traditions instead of Scripture in their attempt to remove the need for constructing theologies. Other scholars who indicate a preference for sola scriptura, Olson continues, prefer to establish their theologies based on their conservative evangelical traditions. While Olson is correct to say that one’s tradition should not establish theology, the list provided by Oden contains the same qualities used by the Early Church to establish the Canon. Even if one wishes to argue that they erred in some way, one ought to prove his point from evidence that remains and that evidence is sola scriptura.

Since McLaren rejects the Bible as primary evidence, he is obliged to consider all interpretations and confer upon them at least some degree of validity because of his postmodern epistemology. In response, Douglas K. Blount says that just because all interpretations of Scripture are possible, it does not follow that they are all equally plausible because plausibility is a matter of preference. Michael J. Murray develops Blount’s point further by pointing out that rationality is relative to facts from which one determines truth through logic. Since McLaren avoids rationality, he cannot determine

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295 Ibid., 102-104. Olson accuses Millard Erickson, Wayne Grudem, and Carson of applying conservative evangelical parameters to their theologies prematurely instead of constructing theology directly from Scripture.


297 Michael J. Murray, “Reason for Hope (in the Postmodern World),” in Reason for the Hope within, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 15-
plausibility of doctrines or systematic theologies. Since McLaren is prevented from determining truth with certainty, he presents truth within a narrative frameworks as a mystery.

_Elevation of Mystery_

By viewing the Bible as a story, truth and meaning become enshrined in it and as a story, its contents cannot be placed in modern categories of myth and fact. These two categories were the substance of theological debates regarding the Bible in the modern era between liberals and fundamentalists. The debate itself likely began with a rise of naturalism beginning with Benedict Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670 and continued later through efforts of David Hume and Rudolf Bultmann among others whose writings developed the view of Scripture as myth because of a denial of supernatural intervention in the natural world. McLaren admits to having read Bultmann in his college years, but then he downplays his view of Scripture in favor of seeing it as a story. He credits his perception to Walter Brueggemann who prefers “poetic speech” instead of “doctrinal clarifications.”

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300 Walter Brueggemann, _Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech of Proclamation_ (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 3; McLaren, _Generous Orthodoxy_, 145-146; Brian McLaren, “Brian’s Recommendations” [on-line]; accessed 9
Brueggemann’s perception of the Bible as “poetic speech” mirrors Hans Frei’s narrative hermeneutic as a means to end philosophical debates between liberals and evangelicals. In response, Henry points out that simply viewing the Bible as a story does not confirm whether or not one views it as fact or myth.\(^{301}\) By viewing the Bible as a story, McLaren is trying to avoid naturalism and affirm supernaturalism even while maintaining that true meaning of Scripture is uncertain. As a postmodernist, McLaren is “extremely receptive to stories,” but as Miller observes, “every story [is] equally valid” to a postmodernist.\(^{302}\) By perceiving the Bible as a story, McLaren may find it easier to lessen the importance of its contents, but his efforts reduce Scripture’s essential elements to the category of mystery.\(^{303}\) Seeing the Bible as a composition of mysteries allows McLaren to reject the categories of myth and fact historically favored by liberals and fundamentalists respectively in favor of a narrative framework that conceals truth.

March 2011; available from http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/books/brians-recommen; Internet. McLaren even recommends Brueggemann’s work on his website.

\(^{301}\) Carl F. H. Henry, “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,” *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987): 4, 9-14. Henry questions the efficacy of narrative theology even among its conservative proponents by asking whether or not Scripture should be viewed as a wholistic story of God or as a collection of stories about the same God. He notes a tendency to focus primarily on acts of God in history at the expense of other elements within the text. This overarching focus of history, that is the story of God, often leads to a disconnect between Scripture and divine authorship by establishing a narrative referent instead of simply holding to a divine referent.

\(^{302}\) Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 37.

\(^{303}\) McLaren, *Finding Faith*, 60; Tom Steffen, “Reaching ‘Resistant’ People through Intentional Narrative,” *Missiology* 28 (2000): 473-74. Tom Steffen, a proponent of chronological Bible storying, argues that the biblical truths can be presented in the context of sharing biblical stories: “[S]tories add humanness to facts argued, interlocking propositions to reality.” Steffen acknowledges that propositional content in stories in not as direct as didactic material but it is nevertheless present. Perhaps those who choose to use chronological Bible storying should consider helping their students discern the
Systemic Theology

To develop his narrative framework which requires little in the way of logical consistency, McLaren denounces the “modern attempt to capture all truth in propositions, organized in a master outline, holding for all times and places and people the universal abstractions extracted from the narratives of Scripture” and promotes “systemic theology” which emphasizes the biblical story as a whole instead its individual parts. This postmodern type of theology, he continues, is “exploratory and creative” and it is “prepared through immersion in the Scriptures and in the life, practices, and mission of the church.” Finally it is tested by resonation “with Scripture, with Christians, with spiritual seekers and skeptics, [and] with experience.”

Christians who adhere to such a theology ultimately become seekers themselves because their postmodern epistemology directs them to continue their search for truth without ever arriving at a conclusion. In making theological adjustments for postmodernism, Christians, McLaren acknowledges, are in danger of succumbing to syncretism. Even so, he believes that one should take on the challenge of developing a propositions contained within the stories presented.

304 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 272-73, 282.
305 Ibid., 276-77.
306 Ibid., 277.
307 Ibid., 247.
308 McLaren, New Kind of Christian, 42.
systemic theology (which may also be called a postmodern faith) while trusting in the Holy Spirit’s presence to guide them correctly. \(^{309}\)

Gailyn Van Rheenen disagrees with McLaren because he believes that capitulation to any worldview, modern, postmodern, or whatever, leads to “the reshaping of Christian beliefs and practices through cultural accommodation so that they . . . blend with those of dominant culture.” \(^{310}\) McLaren may say that he is not reshaping theology; he is simply developing a new approach to theology. His new approach, nonetheless, conceals doctrines within stories to such an extent that doctrinal affirmations and theologies become non-existent. Therefore, his systemic theology ends up denying divinely revealed truth in Scripture simply because it neglects to affirm it as such. On the other hand, such a denial may prove to be very effective if one is trying to contextualize a message for a postmodern audience.

Raschke asks a timely question for all postmodern Christians to consider in their efforts to contextualize theology, “How can [Christians] indigenize without

\(^{309}\) Ibid., 42

\(^{310}\) Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Modern and Postmodern Syncretism in Theology and Missions,” in *Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*, ed. C. Douglas McConnell, Evangelical Missiological Series, no. 5 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997), 173, 191-200; David J. Hesselgrave, “Syncretism: Mission or Missionary Induced?,” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn Van Rheenen, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, no. 13 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 76. Emphasis is his. Van Rheenen discusses ongoing postmodern syncretism with Christianity. He outlines several characteristic beliefs of those who are succumbing to it: the view that reality is a social construction, the hermeneutic that puts experience first, and the idea of an all-powerful God who is ultimately unknowable. To these, Hesselgrave adds, “This syncretism” undermines “the uniqueness of the Christian faith.” All four of these characteristics are applied by McLaren to himself.
This question is a common concern for Christians wishing to contextualize the gospel without falling into the trap of syncretism. Given a rise of postmodernism in the West, McLaren certainly should consider those elements of Christian faith which are purely contextual especially given the shift in popular culture from modernism to postmodernism, according to James E. White, may be “the greatest challenge facing Western Christianity, certainly in America.” Even so, he has gone beyond contextualization by syncretizing essential elements of Christian faith because of inherent relativity common to his systemic theology.

McLaren’s syncretization of theology, however, may appeal to many Americans since sixty-six percent of them reject the Bible as God’s literal word in favor of viewing it either as myth or a collection of words inspired by God. It may even appeal to those beyond America’s borders because of proliferation of relativism in the West and the global South. Ironically, James K. A. Smith, who receives critical praise from McLaren, accuses much of what is called emerging Christianity of succumbing to relativity because of their “timidity with respect to the particularities of the Christian

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311 Raschke, GloboChrist, 55.


313 Frank Newport, “One-Third of Americans Believe the Bible Is Literally True: High Inverse Correlation between Education and Belief in a Literal Bible,” Gallup News Service (25 May, 2007) [on-line]; accessed 8 March 2011; available from http://www.gallup.com/poll/27682/OneThird-Americans-Believe-Bible-Literally-True.aspx; Internet. Newport arrives at his figure by averaging results from three separate polls that were performed 2005 to 2007. In the interpretation of his results, it is possible some respondents may have chosen to view the Bible as inspired not because they do not believe it be God’s word but because of various inerrancy concerns.
confessional tradition” and their “retreat into a thinly ‘ecumenical’ Christianity that reduces confession to bland concerns with justice or love.”

Smith, however, is simply advocating a postmodern narrative approach to Scripture and theology similar to that of McLaren which he calls a radical orthodoxy and a postmodern corrective to Cartesian modernism. The postmodern corrective, also called a second naiveté, rejects Cartesian foundationalism in favor of a narrative approach to Scripture that centers on affirmation of historical events.

Second Naiveté

The “second naiveté,” first articulated by Paul Ricoeur, is “the literary and theological subject matter in front of the text that potentially can liberate . . . the text’s claims on the reader’s life and thought.” Ted Campbell applies Ricoeur’s hermeneutical approach, with McLaren’s approval, to establish ecumenism by avoiding systematic theologies in favor of simply affirming “the most basic common teaching of historic Christian communities, the gospel message.” Like Campbell, Stanley J. Grenz and Clark H. Pinnock’s approach to Scripture is similar to Ricoeur’s second naiveté.

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314 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 427.


Grenz does not advocate that theologians discontinue their development of systematic theologies; rather, he simply believes these theologies are simply descriptions of reality because reality cannot be known.\textsuperscript{318} He proposes narrative theology because narratives encapsulate truth within a story allowing theological endeavors to be ongoing as the Christian community converses on the Bible’s meaning. Pinnock, whose view on narrative theology is supported by Grenz, places proposition in a secondary role to the biblical story.\textsuperscript{319} In this way, Grenz and Pinnock, followed by McLaren, dichotomize story and proposition as two distinct perspectives of Scripture that defy interconnection.\textsuperscript{320} Since human minds are incapable of discerning propositional truths with certainty, Grenz and Franke appeal to the Holy Spirit’s work in theological construction: “[T]he central purpose of the Bible is not to provide raw materials for erecting a systematic theological edifice. Rather, [Christians] engage in the theological enterprise conscious that [they] are servants of the Spirit and ministers within the community of those who seek to discern the Spirit’s voice through the appropriated text.”\textsuperscript{321}

\textsuperscript{318}Grenz, \textit{Revisioning Evangelical Theology}, 78.


\textsuperscript{320}Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmeyer, \textit{A is for Abductive}, 275.

\textsuperscript{321}Grenz and Franke, \textit{Beyond Foundationalism}, 83-84.
In his interview with Jon Stanley, McLaren states that through reading the Bible with a second naiveté he was able to write *The Secret Message of Jesus*.\(^{322}\) By applying Ricoeur’s second naiveté, McLaren opts for a narrative approach to Scripture. In support of McLaren, Alister McGrath criticizes conservative evangelicals for downplaying the role of narrative in revelation and theology.\(^{323}\) In contrast to McGrath’s emphasis upon narrative within special revelation, Helm views Scripture as completely propositional in its contents:

 Granted that the Bible claims to be a special revelation giving knowledge about God not otherwise accessible, in what form does that knowledge come? The answer is: the basic form is an account, in propositions of divine actions and divinely-given interpretations of those actions. Any other revealed matters, such as commands, invitations and promises, logically presuppose the straight propositional account.\(^{324}\)

Grenz responds, “demonstration of the divine authorship of Scripture or its status as revelation need not constitute the prolegomenon of [one’s] theology.”\(^{325}\)

Grenz rejects “evangelical propositionalism,” in favor of a narrative theology because he believes that evangelicals, like Helm, exalt “the propositional dimension of revelation” and fail to mention the social and practical dimension.\(^{326}\) To undercover biblical meaning with a hermeneutic that considers a social and practical dimension, one should perceive divine revelation as “an event that has occurred in the community within


\(^{324}\) Helm, *Divine Revelation*, 51.

\(^{325}\) Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 22.

which the believing individual stands.”

Seen this way, God’s revelation is no longer confined to Scripture; rather, Scripture simply serves as a “foundational record” of God’s work with the biblical community which now informs the theological task of living out God’s message of salvation.

**Conservative Evangelical Response**

Many evangelicals, if not most, will agree with McLaren’s view of the Bible as the story of God but they will also consider how to properly understand its contents. The Bible, most of them will say, is indeed a story, but it is a story built around factual events. Wells, for example, states that the Bible is to be read wholistically as a story, “The importance of the story form in the Bible does not lie in the story form itself, however. Its importance lies in the fact that as a narrative of God’s acts in the external world, it has yielded truth that is as objective as the events to which it is wedded.”

Groothuis, however, cautions that “the Bible does not present a carefully nuanced philosophical discussion of the nature of truth,” but it “does offer a unified perspective on the matter of truth and falsity.” Their view draws support from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, who appeals to facts of Jesus’ life as seen by eyewitnesses as essential components of the gospel story and wonders how one could deny these facts which are integral parts of the

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327 Ibid., 76-77.

328 Ibid., 77.


330 Douglas Groothuis, Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 60. Emphasis is his.

**Chapter Summary**

By embracing a postmodern epistemology, McLaren has been able to deconstruct Scripture and various doctrines that have historically been derived from it to form orthodox faith. While orthodox Christians establish their doctrines based on objective evidence in Scripture, McLaren questions human ability to determine objective truths with certainty. Since truth can never be ascertained objectively, McLaren prefers to view truth as a subjective by arguing that Christ is a personal Subject. By exalting Christ as a personal Subject and equating all truth with His person, McLaren effectively attempts to restrain human ability to arrive at any objective conclusions. Once restrained, people are unable to access even Scripture to arrive at objective truth.

To overcome this obstacle, McLaren turns to experience (individual and communal) to reconstruct theology through a narrative approach to Scripture. He favors such an approach because it allows objective truth claims to remain mysterious within biblical stories. Since McLaren only wants to view these stories wholistically, he avoids delineating any particular doctrines in Scripture and thereby prevents any true meaning from arising within stories. Instead, he finds meaning in actions and events of biblical characters. His approach, however, conceals meaning and prevents it from being articulated in doctrinal formulations; conversely, it does allow McLaren to form his beliefs on the basis of his experience.
CHAPTER 3

NEOORTHOPRAXY AND ETHICAL UNIVERSALISM:
THE DEVALUATION OF DOCTRINE IN BRIAN D. MCLAREN’S KINGDOM OF GOD THEOLOGY

This chapter documents the connection between McLaren’s postmodern epistemology and neoorthopraxy, its affect on his understanding of the doctrine of sola fide, and the resulting ethical universalism. First, a connection between postmodernism and neoorthopraxy is established. Within this section, one will see how McLaren’s missional hermeneutic and pragmatic theory of truth leads him to develop a similar approach to the social gospel. The second section examines sola fide in relation to McLaren’s views on faith and good works. The third section on ethical universalism demonstrates how McLaren’s neoorthopraxy leads him to deny essential elements of the faith.

Postmodern Construction of Neoorthopraxy

Emergents, like McLaren, have “a mindset that values the continuing process of constructive theology seeking new light breaking forth from God’s Word.”331 Justin Taylor observes that emergents “are self-professed evangelicals seeking to revise the theology, renew the center, and transform the worshipping community of evangelicalism,

cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live.” In this way, emergents move beyond God’s Word as the sole source for their theological construction and include “tradition, culture, and the contemporary experience.”

The goal of these new theological constructions, according to Olson, is a generous orthodoxy that prizes inclusivity, deplores foundationalism, prefers experience rather than doctrine, and emphasizes God’s relational nature. This generous orthodoxy contradicts McLaren’s understanding of “contemporary Christianity” which condemns non-Christians to hell as well as his understanding of competing views that declare Christianity to be completely false. McLaren charges contemporary Christianity with domesticating Jesus and making Christianity into what Karl Marx called “an opiate of the masses” by “arguing about the details” and neglecting to get involved in social action.

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333 Ibid., 19.


335 Brian McLaren, “Power, in Ways We Don’t Understand,” Closing Address as the 2003 Emergent Convention, Emergent Village (2 September 2003), podcast [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/power-in-ways-we-dont-understand; Internet. At this conference, he favors a gospel that starts with a global understanding before moving onto the faith community and personal understanding. This involves a deconstruction and reconstruction of the faith around the creation because, in the West, “somehow the doctrine of the fall made the doctrine of creation stop mattering.”

336 Brian McLaren, “Domesticated Jesus,” Brian McLaren's Channel (8 October 2007) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from
In response, Mohler says that McLaren’s generous orthodoxy has “no claim to orthodoxy” and “no claim to any continuity with the historic Christian tradition.”337 McLaren’s disregard for doctrinal affirmation leads him to redefine theology to support his neoorthopraxy: “Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, [and] its meaning.”338 By placing theology as a sub-discipline of missiology, McLaren demonstrates his belief that doctrines without actions have very little value. As he puts it, “[O]rthodox understandings of the Trinity that don’t lead to” orthopraxis “are more or less worthless.”339 McLaren credits his position to Bosch whom he believes made theology a sub-discipline of missiology; however, a thorough examination of Bosch’s work does not lead to such a conclusion.340

**Missional Hermeneutic**

Since McLaren places missiology before theology, he develops a missional hermeneutic to the Bible which asks, “What is God doing missionally in this passage?”341

337 Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”


339 Ibid., 31, 105.

340 McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 105; David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1995), 27-32; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 494. Bosch appears to equate missiology and theology. He calls for “a missiological agenda for theology, not just a theological agenda for theology; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the missio Dei.” Bosch considers missiology a sub-discipline of theology which, nonetheless, gives theology a reason to exist; in other words, missiology is the purpose of theology.

341 McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 76. Emphasis is
McLaren’s emphasis on missions, Jason Byassee observes, is where he is “most clearly orthodox.”\textsuperscript{342} In response, John S. Bohannon sees this as a diversion from “traditional hermeneutics” because McLaren moves towards missions before establishing doctrines.\textsuperscript{343}

Some debate exists over the exact meaning of missional. Elmer L. Towns observes it most often refers to making missions the central task of churches instead of church growth, but then he expresses a common concern that an overarching emphasis on missions may lead to a social gospel, a concern that may be a reality when one holds to a postmodern epistemology.\textsuperscript{344} Within Emerging Church circles, ‘missional,’ Eitel observes, is often used to outline a Christian witness that focuses on right actions with little emphasis on right beliefs.\textsuperscript{345}

While the exact meaning of missional has not yet been determined by scholars, McLaren understands it to mean inauguration of the Kingdom of God in one’s life

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\textsuperscript{343} John S. Bohannon, “Preaching and the Emerging Church: A Homiletical Analysis and Critique of a Select Number of Emerging Church Pastors—Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt—with Contemporary Implications for Evangelical (Expository) Preaching” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 66.


\textsuperscript{345} Keith E. Eitel, “Shifting to the First Person: On Being Missional” (Center for Theological Research, 2009), 4; accessed 1 April 2011; available from http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/ShiftingtotheFirstPerson.pdf; Internet. According to Eitel, missional often refers to an application of postmodern epistemology to the Christian witness.
through service of others. By using this approach to Scripture, McLaren admits meaning within some passages becomes obscure but he is more concerned about allowing the Bible to inform one’s actions as opposed to one’s thoughts. Applying the Bible to mission can also be aided, in McLaren’s estimation, by “practicing God’s presence,” a spiritual discipline which he believes can be a major motivational and sustaining factor in effective mission work.

Inspiration of Scripture, in McLaren’s view, does not cause it to be a source of divinely revealed truth that can be known with certainty. Instead, it serves all humanity by “equipping [Christians] so that [they] can benefit others, so that [they] can play [their] part in the ongoing mission of God.” This perception of Scripture limits its inspiration to its role in promoting mission among Christians and benefits that are produced among all people while at the same time downplaying any view of Scripture that construes it to be a source of divinely authored guidance on temporal and eternal matters. Even so, McLaren affirms in his blog that God’s Spirit is the source of Scripture, but in addition, the voice of Spirit can come to people in a myriad of ways because “all of creation can have a sacramental quality.” Perhaps McLaren does not view the Bible as a repository of answers for all life’s questions, as a source for gaining assurance of salvation, as “a

346 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 105-109.
347 McLaren and Campolo, Adventures in Missing the Point, 77.
348 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 176.
349 Ibid., 159.
simple, clear, efficient, and convenient plan for getting to heaven after death,” or as a source of clear propositional truths on morality.\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Generous Orthodoxy}, 160.}

**Pragmatic Theory of Truth**

Neoorthopraxy, which exhibits “a turn from doctrines to practices” whereby “unity is built less around a list of things one professes to believe and more around how one pursues truth and puts belief into action through practices,” has become a defining characteristic of Emerging Church practitioners.\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Last Word and the Word after that}, 197.} McLaren appears to have been heavily influenced in his turn toward neoorthopraxy by Newbigin:

> Knowledge cannot be severed from living and acting, for [people] cannot know the truth unless [they] seek it with love and unless [their] love commits [them] to action. . . . The confidence proper to a Christian is not the confidence of one who claims possession of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who had heard and answered the call that comes from the God through whom and for whom all things were made: ‘Follow me.’\footnote{Newbigin, \textit{Proper Confidence}, 105.}

By emphasizing unity in the pursuit of truth and promotion of action, McLaren’s postmodernism is moving toward a pragmatic theory of truth which determines truth based on its beneficial effects.\footnote{Brian McLaren, “Found in Translation: ‘Kingdom of God’ is So Last-Century. Are There New Ways to Talk About Jesus’ Good News,” \textit{Sojourners} 35, no. 3 (2006): 17. McLaren admits “there is more to the [K]ingdom than mission; being in relationship is essential to life in the [K]ingdom, so [K]ingdom life is not just doing work.” Since McLaren denies propositional revelation, the relationship with God, to}
In context, right refers to right beliefs and good refers to good actions.

Millard J. Erickson observes that postmodernism ultimately requires its adherents to affirm either coherence or pragmatic theories.

Groothuis believes that all postmodernists will ultimately default to a pragmatic epistemology. Richard Rorty, who advocates the pragmatic theory, rejects objective epistemology in favor of simply trying out various ideas and theories to determine which works best. Several problems, however, exists with this theory of truth. First, if truth can only be determined by its outcomes, one must know what is good and what the desired outcome should be according to Bertrand Russell. This presents two difficulties, namely, the outcome of any particular ‘truth’ may not be known beforehand and the person advocating any such truth will likely have a different definition of what is good. David A. Mappes agrees and points out that McLaren’s placement of experience as truth’s arbiter leaves one unable to ascertain the meaning of which he speaks, must be a relationship centered around a search for God.


357 Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 104.


good. With so many possible views on what is good, McLaren’s pragmatic epistemology can lead to any number of truth claims.

Groothuis uncovers a second problem for the pragmatic theory of truth: beliefs that work may actually not be true because false beliefs have potential to motivate people to perform actions that may have some benefit to them. For example, a person fearing another Great Depression may save for a lifetime and end up enjoying a comfortable retirement despite not having experienced a depression.

**Similarity to the Social Gospel**

Since McLaren’s missional hermeneutic and pragmatism focus on action and avoid affirming particular doctrines, he establishes a new middle path, or a generous orthodoxy, through liberalism and fundamentalism which ends up which bears resemblance to the social gospel postmodern rendition of the social gospel. This rendition, which can be called neoorthopraxy, emphasizes the same call to social action given during the SGM. Proponents of the social gospel focused heavily on social action

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361 Groothuis, “Truth Defined and Defended,” 76.

because of work of liberal scholars who placed much of Scripture in the category of myth.

Walter Rauschenbusch, who is known as father of the SGM, argues that traditional Christian eschatologies are composed, at least in part, of mythology and must be subjugated to “the revelation of the justice, love, and forgiving mercy” of God.\textsuperscript{363} In addition to these qualities, he further subjugates eschatology and any other doctrine derived from Scripture to scientific and historical facts.\textsuperscript{364} By elevating objective evidence, Rauschenbusch is able to develop uncertainty for more controversial elements of traditional eschatologies such as final judgment and hell along with any other doctrines which may contradict the social gospel which promotes ongoing construction of the Kingdom of God in this world: “[T]he Kingdom of God on earth requires surprisingly little dogma and speculative theology, and a tremendous quantity of holy will and scientific good sense.”\textsuperscript{365}

Since they view much of the Bible as myth or at least held with a high degree of suspicion, many proponents of the social gospel avoided any controversial elements of Scripture. Instead, they developed what Richard Niebuhr calls The Kingdom of God in America which denied essential elements of faith and ultimately the cross of Christ: “The

\textsuperscript{363}Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: MacMillan, 1917), 208. While Rauschenbusch correctly points out that Christian eschatology views must not contradicts God’s love, he neglects other critical aspects of God’s character which inform many eschatological views such as God’s holiness and wrath against sinners.

\textsuperscript{364}Ibid., 208-209, 215-20.

\textsuperscript{365}Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianizing the Social Order (New York: MacMillan, 1912), 118.
romantic conception of the [K]ingdom of God involved no discontinuities, no crises, no tragedies, or sacrifices, no loss of all things, no cross and resurrection. In ethics it reconciled the interests of the individual with those of society by means of faith in a natural identity of interests or in the benevolent, altruistic character of man.\(^\text{366}\) This view of God’s Kingdom sought to establish Christ’s Reign on this earth through efforts of humanity.\(^\text{367}\) The work of humanity in social action became the central focus and supplanted the person and work of Christ. As Niebuhr puts it, God of the SGM became a “God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”\(^\text{368}\)

Michael Wittmer, Kevin DeYoung, and Stephen Hunt all associate McLaren with the SGM.\(^\text{369}\) In response, McLaren readily affirms his position’s semblance with both the social gospel and liberation theology.\(^\text{370}\) Wills, however, suggests that


\(^{370}\) McLaren, “Ur Video: Brian McLaren on Being a Heretic”; Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren One-on-one with CLC,” Centenary College of Louisiana’s Christian Leadership Center (15 November 2010), video [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011;
McLaren’s position has a postmodern twist.\(^{371}\) Whereas the social gospel arose from higher critics who mythologized Scripture, McLaren, through his postmodern epistemology, deconstructs Scripture and then reconstructs his theology around events within a narrative.

As a story, the Bible provides McLaren with mysteries (or paradoxes) instead of myths. McLaren does not follow higher critics who influenced SGM’s rise; instead, he mythologizes doctrines which gave rise to Orthodoxy by questioning human ability to be certain about any doctrine and retains a higher view of Scripture than many higher critics. The willingness of these critics to exalt individual autonomy above sacred Scripture becomes abhorrence to McLaren. His postmodern epistemology retains a much lower view of humanity that prevents them from declaring Scripture to be a myth. Even so, his denial of sola scriptura and biblical inerrancy convolutes the message of Scripture and causes one to remain unsure of whether or not to place it in the category of myth or divine fact.

\(^{371}\)Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”

available from http://vimeo.com/17063775; Internet; Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, ed. William E. Jerman and trans. Paul Burns (Kent, UK: Burns & Oates/Search, 1987; reprint, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 43-47; John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 13, 33; Castellanos and McLaren, “Noel Castellanos & Brian McLaren.” McLaren also believes his position aligns with Latino theology. In the podcast, McLaren calls his god the “god of liberation.” While McLaren admits his alignment with the social gospel, he claims that he did not become aware of their works until after he developed his thinking on the Kingdom of God, a thinking which he appears to believe aligns with the SGM. Similarities between McLaren and Latin American theologies (such as those by Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff and John Sobrino) can be seen in their overarching concern for liberating the poor and the oppressed. Furthermore, some Latin American theologians allow their Christologies to be equally informed by “the present-day situation” and “the historical Jesus.”
Since his narrative reconstruction fails to provide definitive doctrinal statements, McLaren’s attention begins to drift toward social action. In comparison to the SGM, McLaren emphasizes God’s love and grace, human works, and the Kingdom of God on earth. McLaren’s affirmation of these core tenets of the social gospel through his postmodern epistemology forms the basis of his neoorthopraxy: “To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving (ethical) community of people who are seeking the truth (doctrine) on the road of mission . . . and who have been launched on the [ongoing] quest by Jesus.”

_Sola Fide within Neoorthopraxy_

Since pragmatism has been elevated above divinely revealed truth in Scripture, McLaren’s neoorthopraxy has been able to establish a faith that unites Christians based on their action. Rick Warren receives McLaren’s praise for recognizing this shift and calls it the next reformation:

> [T]he first Reformation . . . was about beliefs. [The] new reformation is going to be about behavior. The first Reformation was about creeds; . . . [T]his one will be about deeds. . . . [T]he first one was about what the church believes; . . . [T]his one will be about what the church does. The first Reformation actually split Christianity into dozens and then hundreds of different segments. . . . [T]his one is actually going to bring them together.

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372 McLaren, _Generous Orthodoxy_, 293.

Christians, Warren observes, will not unite “on all of the different doctrinal disputes,” but they may unify around “the purposes of the church.”

Sola Fide and the Next Reformation

For McLaren, the unity advocated by Warren is possible through social action because his postmodern epistemology places the referent outside of God’s Word and inside human interpreters. By allowing human experience to become the primary referent of truth, McLaren can disregard and even disown essential elements of Christian faith in his promotion of social action, a promotion which serves to benefit human experience in general. Whereas reformers like Luther and Calvin are widely recognized for adhering to sola scriptura, McLaren transitions to a dependence on experience. He credits his “postmodern transition” from modernism associated with reformers to Søren Kierkegaard’s existentialism, a predecessor to theologians like Barth and Niebuhr who established neoorthodoxy. In 2001, McLaren credits Kierkegaard for his method of gospel presentation which emphasizes a presence and relational evangelistic approach with no direct claim to certainty regarding Christ and His teachings; instead, he simply presents his views and allows recipients to make their own conclusions.

1984), 73. Like McLaren, Rauschenbusch also sought to bring forth a second reformation based on Christ’s teachings of the Kingdom of God.

374 Warren, “Myths of the Modern Megachurch.”

375 Brian McLaren, “They Say It's Just a Phase” [on-line]; accessed 9 March 2011; available from http://www.next-wave.org/jul01/phase.htm; Internet. McLaren also gives Neitsche credit for his postmodernism.

376 McLaren, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” 125.
Kierkegaard rejects any Christian faith which does not translate itself into works even while maintaining *sola fide*. Some debate exists over whether or not Kierkegaard’s doctrine of faith excluded the need for rationality. While Francis A. Schaeffer, Colin Brown, Robert C. Solomon believe that he separates faith from reason, Chris Simpson believes that their conclusions, though popularly held, are based on common misunderstandings of Kierkegaard’s terminology. Despite Simpson’s contention, one can certainly see how Kierkegaard’s discussion on faith and reason can easily be interpreted to mean that both are mutually exclusive: “The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ’s divinity . . . are therefore only for faith, that is they are not ‘proofs,’ they have no intention of proving that all this agrees perfectly with reason; on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.”

Following Kierkegaard, emergents like McLaren may have difficulty outlining contours of their faith due to their wariness for objective truth claims. Emergents,

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McKnight correctly points out, are characterized by their focus on orthopraxy and believe both orthodoxy and orthopraxy should go together in the same way Apostle James connected them: “Faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:14-26). Wade Bradshaw supports McKnight’s conclusion, “The first Reformation was the re-discovery of the theology of Paul. . . . A second, postmodern Reformation will require the complementary rediscovery of the theology of James.” Since the first Reformation, scholarship has struggled with the doctrine of sola fide due to perceptible differences between theologies of James and Paul at least since Luther’s time. Günther Bornkamm, Rudolf Bultmann, and Sophie Laws, among others, support the claim that the theology of Paul and James cannot be harmonized. Those who oppose lordship salvation are uncomfortable with James’ insistence on the presence of works in believers’ lives. Some would argue with

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383 Strict opponents to lordship salvation seek to separate faith in Jesus as savior and faith in Jesus as Lord. They argue that a true Christian can have intellectual faith and heartfelt conviction without the presence of works and still be saved through the merit of Christ. Hebrews 11:1 says, Ἄνετι δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων. If one truly has πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, then how could they not acknowledge Christ as Lord and act accordingly unless they still do not have πίστις? The opponent of lordship salvation would respond by distinguishing the free will of the believer from his or her faith. But in Eph 2:8, Paul calls faith a gift of God. Those who receive the gift of faith from God must receive the same active faith as that of
Luther and his supporters by saying that Paul and James had the same position but were defending their common faith; however, they just used different starting points to begin their discussion. C. Leslie Mitton and Alexander Ross agree with this view.

Paul’s discussion of faith is focused on obtaining it, as seen in Romans 3:28, where he argues that a person is saved by faith and not by works. In 2:24, James says that both faith and works must occur together if one is to be justified. Curiously, both Paul in Romans 3:28 and James in 2:24 use Genesis 15:6 to prove their argument’s validity. If one accepts the apostolicity of both the epistles of James and Paul, then one must find how both apostles’ arguments are based on sound doctrine. Historically, Protestants have followed in Luther’s steps and supported *sola fide*.

**Sola Fide in the Epistles of Paul and James**

This section develops a biblical foundation for *sola fide* by synthesizing the epistles of Paul and James. Much debate over differences between Paul and James could be resolved by their understanding of faith. In Romans 10:8, Paul says that the

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Abraham and Rahab since God does not show favoritism (cf. Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11).

384 C. Ryan Jenkins, “Faith and Works in Paul and James,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2002): 63-64. This paper will take the view that Paul and James were in agreement but were focused on different audiences. James does not undermine Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2:8 that one is saved by grace through faith; rather, he merely defines faith. Other views listed by Jenkins include the argument from James that justification depends on faith and works. Another is that works are required for temporal deliverance. Both of these arguments run contrary to Pauline theology and are presumed incorrect for the purposes of this paper. Instead, the canonicity of James is accepted and therefore expected to be harmonized with Pauline theology.

proclaimed word is in his audience's heart even though his audience is filled with believers and non-believers. John 1:1 equates God with his Word. From this alone, one could say that Jesus was in the heart and mouth of those present when Paul spoke since Jesus and God are one. To obtain the word that is in their hearts, Paul declared that they must confess “Jesus is Lord” and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead (cf. Rom 10:9). Paul’s plan of salvation in Romans 10:9 is composed of two primary parts: confession with one’s mouth that “Jesus is Lord” and belief (πίστις) in Christ’s resurrection. Does this mean mere words and πίστις are enough? If one affirms sola fide, then why do Christians even have to make a confession if faith is all that is required? Has Paul added works to the requirements of salvation by arguing for the need of a confession? Is Paul’s emphasis on a confession any different from James’ emphasis on charitable deeds?

If Paul adds works to the requirements of salvation, why does he say in Romans 3:28 δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου? Paul’s conclusion that a person is justified by faith apart from works is the basis of the sola fide doctrine. Clearly, Paul does not wish to add the confession “Jesus is Lord” or anything else to the requirement of sola fide (cf. Rom 10:9). Like Paul, James does not wish to add charitable works, works of the law, or anything else to sola fide either. He certainly does not wish to add fruitless words to the requirements of salvation (cf. Jas 2:15-17). So why does James say ἡ πίστις ἐὰν μὴ ἔχῃ ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστιν καθ’ ἑαυτήν in 2:17? So what does James mean in 2:24 when he says ἐξ ἔργων δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως μόνον?

James argues in 2:17 that faith cannot καθ’ ἑαυτήν, but must be accompanied by deeds. At first glance, this seems to contradict sola fide. However, any perceived
contradiction can be eliminated depending on the nature of faith. Is faith active, inactive, or somewhere in between? If real faith is faith that leads to demonstrable, charitable acts of love like those of Abraham and Rahab (cf. Jas 2:21-25), then saving faith must be an active faith. Daniel B. Wallace supports such a conclusion when he says: “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.”

James acknowledges that true faith is present before works and independent of works in v. 18 where he demonstrates his faith by his action. James could not possibly demonstrate his faith by his action unless his faith was present before his action. His faith precedes action and stands independent of action. Though faith is independent of action because salvation is based on Christ’s action alone, it is displayed outwardly in believers’ life. As John F. MacArthur says, “Faith is by nature turned toward obedience (Acts 5:32; Rom 1:5; 2:8:16:26).” Bultmann however fails to see the presence of faith before works in James 2:14-26, and he hastily argues that James is claiming that faith only saves alongside of works.

To conflict with the *sola fide* doctrine of Paul, James would have to argue that a person was required to have works in order to be saved. James sees works as an expression of salvation rather than a means of salvation. Likewise, Paul also acknowledges works as an expression of true Christianity (cf. Gal 5:6; Rom 2:6; 14:12).

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Luke Timothy Johnson notes that James, like all other biblical authors other than Paul, uses the term “works” to speak of a Christian’s morality rather than legalistic adherence to the law.\(^{389}\) Douglass J. Moo disagrees with Johnson because he does not see a Christian morality theme in James illustration from the lives of Abraham and Rahab; rather, he perceives their acts as simple obedience and servanthood (2:21-25).\(^{390}\) An examination of Paul’s letters reveals that he used ἔργον fifty out of sixty-seven times to refer to Christian morality, according to Johnson.\(^{391}\)

Paul, on the other hand, in Galatians 5:6 declares that following OT rituals is not what matters; what matters is πίστις that works through love.\(^{392}\) Calvin agrees by saying that faith and a “devout disposition” must occur together, and through this disposition “the Holy Spirit is a witness of [a Christian’s] adoption” because the Lord

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\(^{390}\) Douglass J. Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1985), 102. Moo’s argument that the stories of Abraham and Rahab do not seem to portray an example of Christian charity is somewhat stretched. Clearly, Abraham’s obedience to God displayed a charitable act toward God. Rahab’s charitable act toward the Jewish spies displayed the vitality of her faith. She took them into her home, gave them refuge, and provided them with a safe exit. Her love for God (faith in God) was proved by her care for God’s people, and Abraham’s love for God (faith in God) was proved by his willingness to sacrifice that which was most precious to him.


\(^{392}\) Paul specifically mentions the OT ritual of circumcision in Gal 5:6.
“cannot be known apart from the sanctification of his Spirit.” Calvin also adds that even faith itself does not justify, rather Christ’s merits alone justify sinners who receive them by faith. McLaren affirms the indwelling work of God’s Spirit and the inability of humanity to justify themselves; nevertheless, his postmodern epistemology prevents him ultimately from defining contours for his faith and forces him to focus on actions even while he continues to search for truth.

Bornkamm warns against this postmodern trend that only gives credence to “faith made perfect in love.” But the question must be asked: At what point in the justification process must love occur? Paul loves churches and the Lord enough to endure much suffering in his day, yet before his Damascus experience he has set out to uproot the Church. Paul’s love for the Lord and for his people follows his salvation experience on the Damascus road. Love expressed through acts of charity does not precede justification; rather, “justification is their precondition and the root from which they grow.”

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396 Bornkamm, *Paul, Paulus*, 153

397 Ibid.
Before his Damascus road experience, Paul certainly had an intellectual knowledge of God through his extensive studies of the OT as a Pharisees. Intellectual knowledge, however, was not enough to share God’s love through works. His pre-conversion faith bears a high degree of similarity to that of demons. James states in 2:19 that demons have πίστις.398 Obviously, demonic faith is not the faith Paul refers to in Romans 3:28 when he says δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἰνθρωπον. Surely πίστις of demons is not the same as the active πίστις that James claims to have in 2:18. James I. Packer suggests that James’ definition of faith, in this case, was merely intellectual assent devoid of action.399 Leon Morris notes that James’ faith, unlike that of demons, is a not an intellectual faith; rather, it is the πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργομένη mentioned in Galatians 5:6.400

Scripture clearly shows that demons are aware of Jesus’ authority (cf. Matt 8:31; Luke 8:27). Demons are aware that their destination was the lake of fire according to Matthew 8:29. If demonic πίστις did not have saving power, what was their πίστις lacking? In Matthew 7:22-23, Jesus rebukes those who recognize Him and do many great things in His name; He even refers to them as ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν. Recognizing Jesus (intellectual faith) and doing good works (right action) is simply not enough, what

398 James uses πίστεύω, which is the verbal form of πίστις.
is needed is a pure heart with an obedient spirit. True faith springs forth from a pure heart leading to an active expression in Christian life.

**Sola Fide and Brian D. McLaren**

The previous section demonstrates the relationship between Paul and James on *sola fide* by examining Scripture for evidence. Concerning Romans, McLaren believes that *sola fide* is not “the theme of the letter”; rather, the “theme” is “all human beings, regardless of their status as religious insiders or outsiders, are invited into the new community of God.” McLaren’s rejection of *sola fide* arises from his denial of an internal referent of divine authorship within Scripture and human ability to interpret correctly the divine author’s meaning. Furthermore, he calls this articulation of *sola fide* a “modern faith” because of its reliance on rational inquiry and the ability to attain certainty along with its promotion of individuals over and against community.

McLaren believes that two broad categories of faith exist: good faith and bad faith. Whereas bad faith does not lead to action, good faith, McLaren asserts, has right practice as its defining characteristic: “Faith is a state of relative certainty about matters of ultimate concern sufficient to promote action.” Faith can only attain “relative

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401 Deut. 4:29; 1Chr. 28:9; 2 Chr. 7:14, 15:12; Psa. 24:4-6, 63:1, 119:2, 119:10; Isa. 51:1; Jer. 29:13; 2 Tim 2:22; Heb. 11:6.

402 McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 75. Emphasis is his.


405 Ibid., 31. Emphasis is his.
certainty” because the ability to know things with absolute certainty is impossible. The “matters of ultimate concern” mentioned by McLaren in his definition of faith can include daily decisions, one’s purpose in life, value judgments, life and death situations, and the afterlife.

As he unpacks his definition, McLaren explains that faith is a state of being in which one experiences and thinks about things, and it includes “propositions, ideas, [and] specific beliefs.” This postmodern faith is informed by both personal experience and any number of external sources. Elevating experience, however, subjugates biblical propositions to a position of virtual irrelevancy, as Grenz suggests, “A postmodern articulation of the gospel is post-rationalistic. It no longer focuses on propositions as the central content of Christian faith. Instead, it takes seriously a dynamic understanding of the role of the intellectual dimension of human experience.” While it may be informed by these sources, it can never become fully developed because those who possess it ought to be willing to reexamine their faith for possible errors and make necessary adjustments.

Elevation of Search

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406 Ibid., 32.
407 Ibid. Emphasis is his.
408 Ibid.
In criticism of his definition of faith, McLaren admits that he fails to mention God because he views faith as more of a search for God than a state of being where one has found God.\textsuperscript{411} To obtain faith, McLaren challenges his readers to embark on a quest, one which he himself is also on, that requires one’s mind, “emotions, aspirations, dreams and hopes and fears, drives, desires, [and] intuitions.”\textsuperscript{412} According to McLaren, “Faith involves admitting with humility and boldness that [one] need[s] to change, to go against the flow, to be different, to face and shine the light on [one’s] cherished illusions and prejudices, and discover new truths that can be liberating even though they may be difficult for the ego, painful to the pride.”\textsuperscript{413} Those who wish to obtain faith should understand that “[t]here is no simple formula or easy recipe that [one] can follow to arrive at faith.”\textsuperscript{414}

During their search, Christians, McLaren believes, may find some prospective truths (truths held with a degree of uncertainty), but these truths should not be kept if they lead to bigotry, oppression, and violence.\textsuperscript{415} As he declares in \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, faith is a process of developing a satisfactory theology.\textsuperscript{416} This satisfactory theology does not include foundational doctrines (other than maybe those in the Apostles’

\textsuperscript{411}Ibid., 41-42.
\textsuperscript{412}Ibid., 13, 18.
\textsuperscript{413}Ibid., 13-14.
\textsuperscript{414}Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{415}Ibid., 29-30.
\textsuperscript{416}McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 114-15.
and Nicene Creeds); rather, it is more like a journey or quest for truth whereby one is constantly transforming.\textsuperscript{417}

McLaren’s theology of search or exploratory theology is derived from Grenz who says, “Christian theology may be described as the discipline that seeks to discover, articulate, explore, and clarify the Christian belief-mosaic.”\textsuperscript{418} Henry declares, “Divine revelation is a mental activity” that offers “intelligible disclosure” of its contents.\textsuperscript{419} Likewise, Helm affirms divine revelation as the source of knowledge but dismisses natural revelation because recognizing God’s testimony about Himself “through nature and human affairs” is not the same as knowing “that [H]e exists on the basis of that revelation alone.”\textsuperscript{420}

By affirming the two creeds, McLaren demonstrates his agreement with Helm that Scripture does indeed offer a source of clear knowledge about God; even so, he is wary of his elevation of propositions in favor of viewing the Bible as a source for divine-human relationship. This relationship can be seen more clearly by what Pinnock calls “historical-redemptive” hermeneutic which interprets the gospel through the lens “of the momentous events associated with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ” as opposed to interpretations “rooted in speculative philosophy or in nature mysticism.”\textsuperscript{421}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{417} Ibid., 132.
\item \textsuperscript{419} Carl F. H. Henry, Towards a Recovery of Christian Belief: The Rutherford Lectures (Wheaton: IL: Crossway, 1990), 54.
\item \textsuperscript{420} Helm, Divine Revelation, 26-32.
\item \textsuperscript{421} Pinnock, Tracking the Maze, 160.
\end{itemize}
who draws McLaren’s support, affirms Pinnock’s approach to Scripture and adds that “community preserves its memory [of the historical-redemptive event], while both reinterpreting the event in light of the subsequent situations in which the community finds itself and discovering in it the source of a renewed hope for the future.”

In criticism of this hermeneutic, Basil Grafas states, ‘Incarnation’ becomes the subject itself, an entire canvas, rather than one part of a larger painting whose subject is Christ. By moving the Incarnation into the foreground and isolating it from its context, [they] run the risk of moving the atonement, redemption in Christ and the glory of God in the worship of the Son of God into obscurity. This, therefore, becomes a manifest distortion of the core message of the Bible.

By developing his faith apart from the context of Scripture, McLaren neglects Christ’s revealed person and end ups doubting even that which has been revealed.

Elevation of Doubt

For McLaren, doubt is sometimes “virtuous” because through uncertainty God will lead people to better beliefs. Such doubt is what McLaren calls true faith—“a faith that leans on God himself, and not on [human] understanding, including . . . theological

422 Grenz, “Stanley J. Grenz,” 24-26; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 217-18; Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 71-72; McLaren, Foreword to Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in Post-Theological Era, 2nd ed., written by Stanley J. Grenz (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 12.


His elevation of doubt comes in part from his reading of *Proper Confidence* where Newbigin portrayed doubt as a companion and derivative of true faith because it helps one critically consider all truth claims to improve the quality of one’s faith.\(^{426}\)

Since language is human construction and therefore fallible, McLaren believes people have “permission to doubt the way [they] speak about God as an act of faith in saying that the real God would have to be better than the way [they] speak about God.”\(^{427}\) Doubt has helped McLaren construct a “four-stage process of faith development,” a process where “one gradually outgrows one version of faith, discards it for a more fitting version, outgrows that, and so on.”\(^{428}\)

At stage one, people have a simplistic view of the world and believe that they can know things with certainty. By stage two, they encounter many possible ways of viewing the world and now find themselves searching for the right way. Then, they conclude that nothing is certain and therefore all knowledge is relative. Finally, they discover the existence of a few absolutes in the midst of widespread uncertainty and mystery.

With stage four, McLaren makes allowances for his affirmation of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds but then leaves all other aspects of the gospel subject to doubt. McLaren’s doubt arises from his lack of trust in human ability to interpret the gospel. McLaren believes that any interpretation of gospel may end up being proved

\(^{425}\)Ibid.


\(^{427}\)McLaren, “Exposing the Emergent Church-Pt.4-Brian McLaren Interview.”

incorrect: “[Christians] must be open to the perpetual possibility that [they] received understandings of the gospel may be faulty, imbalanced, poorly nuanced, or downright warped and twisted. . . . In this sense Christians in missional dialogue must continually expect to rediscover the gospel.” By making human interpretation the sole albeit faulty hermeneutical buffer between the Word of God and people, McLaren demonstrates his belief that one cannot go to Scripture directly to read the very words of God nor can they hear God’s meaning behind those words with absolute assurance.

McLaren’s doubt in his own ability to interpret Scripture properly may have arisen in part from his mentor, Grenz, who believes that everyone is trapped in their own biased view of reality and, therefore, incapable of developing an objective view. McLaren, in agreement with Grenz, warns, “Evangelicals, of all people, cannot allow revelation to be imprisoned within the flawed limits of sinful human reason.” J. P. Moreland, however, rejects Grenz’s position by distinguishing between psychological and rational objectivity:

Psychological objectivity is detachment, the absence of bias, a lack of commitment either way on a topic... [I]t is crucial to observe that a lack of psychological objectivity does not matter, nor does it cut one off from knowing or seeing the world directly the way it is, or from presenting and arguing for one’s convictions. Why? Because a lack of psychological objectivity does not imply a lack of rational objectivity, and it is the latter that matters most, not the former. . . . Rational objectivity is the state of having accurate epistemic access to the thing itself. This entails that if one has rational objectivity regarding some topic, then one can discern the difference between genuinely good and bad reasons/evidence for a belief about that topic and one can hold the belief for genuinely good reasons/evidence. The important thing here is that bias does not stand between a knowing subject and an

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intentional object nor does it eliminate a person’s ability to assess the reasons for something. Bias may make it more difficult, but not impossible. If bias made rational objectivity impossible, then no teacher—including the postmodernist herself—could responsibly teach any view the teacher believed on any subject! Nor could the teacher teach opposing viewpoints, because she would be biased against them!

Moreland affirms bias but also believes that bias does not prevent a subject from interacting with the objective world. Through interaction, the subjects are able make rational choices to interact with objective evidence.

Blaise Pascal, in his day, faced a similar problem posed by skeptics who claimed a lack of certainty apart from experience beyond faith and revelation.\textsuperscript{432} He humbly admits the limitations of human rationality but also believes it is prideful for humanity to divorce their reasoning from divine revelation (and divine mystery).\textsuperscript{433} Furthermore, Pascal argues that humanity’s innate knowledge of the divine mystery of original sin, which presents itself today in the shape of human weakness for all to see, and “idea of truth” which has resonated within their being since the fall of humanity places human reasoning between “absolute ignorance” and “certain knowledge” and allows them to see truth and goodness in God’s Word as they encounter its condemnation of human sin.\textsuperscript{434} While Pascal affirms McLaren’s position that absolute certainty is impossible, he still allows room for human reasoning to make doctrinal affirmations through study of God’s word due to their possession of God’s image.

\textsuperscript{432}Blaise Pascal, \textit{Pascal: Pensees}, ed. William Finlayson Trotter (n. p., 1660; reprint, Forgotten, 2008), 111-12. Pascal also expresses concern that the doubt caused by the skeptics of his day would infect the masses. One wonders if this fear should be shared by evangelicals in regard to McLaren, especially given his widespread publications.

\textsuperscript{433}Ibid., 113-115.

\textsuperscript{434}Ibid., 113-116.
Groothuis agrees with Pascal, “There is more to being in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) than being rational, but we are not less rational for that. Reason itself is not fallen. Reason is a fact of God’s reality—of his character, of the order of his creation, and of the minds of his rational creatures.”

Though McLaren prefers to speak in terms of the goodness of all creation, all creation includes humanity. If McLaren affirms humanity’s original goodness, it seems plausible for him to affirm that human reason has some inherent goodness in it as well. Such an affirmation, however, would imply that human reason has at least some potential to understand God’s revelation, a conclusion that violates McLaren’s postmodern epistemology.

**Deeds without Faith**

Since doubt prevents people from making final decisions about particular doctrines, McLaren, based on his understanding of *sola fide*, argues faith’s authenticity can only be measured by action and not by doctrinal affirmations. Most scholars affirm the solid basis of *sola fide* in Paul’s NT writings, but as mentioned previously, widespread disagreement exists on whether or not James affirmed this doctrine. A closer examination of James’ discussion in 2:22-23 reveals that James was arguing that works

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are a proof of salvation rather than a means of salvation. As William Barclay says, a person is “not saved by deeds” but “for deeds.”

Active faith, which holds firmly to biblical teachings and expresses those teachings within and through believer’s actions, is not the faith espoused by McLaren:

Do you believe? Do you even believe that God raised Jesus from the dead?

No big deal! Even Satan believes that. You can believe something and not act on it. Authentic Christianity is a full faith, not thin beliefs. We are saved by grace through faith, not by beliefs. If you have faith in something, it transforms how you live. You cannot not act on it. Satan believes in God. But Satan doesn’t believe God. Believing God is living faith. That’s be-living.

His initial question appears to be drawn from James 2:19 where James says that demons “believe that there is one God,” but then a second question is added that does not appear in James. McLaren’s answer portrays his understanding of faith. Faith, for him, can only be faith if it is acted out in relationship with God.

While James and Paul teach that true faith is indeed active and living, they do not teach that authentic faith occurs without first agreeing with biblical teaching concerning but not limited to Christ’s resurrection. As Paul says in Romans 10:14-17,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.


439Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmeyer, *A is for Abductive*, 43. Emphasis is theirs.
According to Paul, people must first hear and accept the message (truth) about Christ before they can become active Christians. The message that was to be preached was not some call to live an active life before a God who could not be known. This emerging type of faith requires no message, no truth, and no preacher. For that matter, a person with emerging faith as proposed by McLaren, need not hear any message at all; rather, they simply need to get started by doing good works, a task which will prove difficult since they will have no way to determine if any works they do are indeed good works. 440

When McLaren discusses “faith without works,” he typically refers to the need for Christians to engage in social action with little to no mention of particular doctrinal affirmations. 441 In Reinventing Your Church, McLaren replaces “faith without works” with “words of faith without works,” a subtle change that elevates conversation over truth even while continuing to emphasize social action. 442

McLaren believes that emerging Christians “would rather be known primarily as Christ-followers than as adherents to the Christian religion.” 443 Wary of legalism,

440 Appendix 7 offers more discussion on the views of the Emerging Church proponents concerning the nature of the Christian faith.


442 McLaren, Reinventing Your Church, 89.

443 McLaren, Finding Our Way Again, 37.
many Christians may prefer to be viewed as Christ-followers, but following Christ by modeling his actions is not sufficient. Even though Jesus desires Christians to follow Him by putting His words into action, He also states that those actions must occur within a right relationship with Him (Matt 7:21-24). In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus clearly rejects those who perform actions which seem to follow Christ’s actions and yet are not in right relationship with Him.

**Sola Fide and the Kingdom of God**

By focusing on performing right actions based on right beliefs, the Emerging Church, McLaren admits, is characterized by “a turn from doctrines to practices” whereby “unity is built less around a list of things one professes to believe and more around how one pursues truth and puts belief into action through practices.” By eliminating right belief as the unifying center of a Christian community, McLaren wishes to avoid rigidity and exclusivity brought by affirming particular doctrines. Instead of historical doctrines of Christian orthodoxy, McLaren chooses to center churches on his Kingdom of God theology. He argues for “purposeful inclusion” of all people within the Kingdom so long as they are willing “to participate in and contribute to its purpose.” He continues, “The [K]ingdom’s purpose is to gather, to include, [and] to welcome everyone who is willing . . . into reconciliation with God and one another.”

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445 McLaren, *360 Theology*.


447 Ibid., 168.
Jesus, as McLaren portrays Him, presents God’s Kingdom as a “party . . . where even the most notorious outcasts and sinners were welcome.” As McLaren says, all people, regardless of their faith, are incorporated into God’s Kingdom simply by engaging social action and thus “the Kingdom of God is a . . . liberating message.”

While McLaren suggests that all people may be included in the God’s Kingdom, he believes they can be functionally excluded by choice if they did not heed Christ’s call “to think—and think again—and consider becoming part of the [K]ingdom of God so they could experience and participate in the transformation that flows from being in interactive relationship with God and others.” This call, according to McLaren, requires “those who wish to enter [to] actually have a change of heart—that they don’t sneak in to accomplish their own agenda, but rather that they genuinely want to learn a new way of thinking, feeling, living, and being in ‘the pastures of God.’” Those who choose to remain outside of God’s Kingdom “refuse to join with Jesus in [H]is inclusive purpose of gathering, welcoming, reconciling, or uniting in God’s [K]ingdom.”

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448 Ibid., 162.


450 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 162-63.

451 Ibid., 165.

452 Ibid., 168. Emphasis is his.
Besides being functionally excluded for choosing to participate in the Kingdom of God, people can also be excluded for choosing to exclude others even if their beliefs do not align with orthodox teachings. As McLaren puts it, “the [K]ingdom must exclude exclusive people.” Those who advocate that God’s Kingdom is exclusive, McLaren warns, will end up being excluded from it because they are working at cross purposes with God who desires reconciliation. To this end, McLaren is moving toward a more universalistic position that offers salvation to all while functionally excluding some from participation in the Kingdom of God. Because of these exclusive elements, Gary Gilley accuses McLaren of being an inclusivist but suspects that he may actually be a universalist.

**Ethical Universalism**

According to McLaren, Christ’s acceptance of all people makes their acceptance of His salvation automatic unless they expressly choose to reject it: “Jesus threatened people with inclusion; if they were to be excluded, it would be because they refused to accept their acceptance.” Despite his statement, McLaren rejects exclusivism, inclusivism, and universalism, and favors “ethical universalism” which allows everyone to participate in a sort of heaven on earth in this life and the next.

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453 Ibid., 169.
454 Ibid., 169.
455 Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 283.
because God’s Kingdom, according to McLaren, is both an eternal and a temporal reality thereby rendering it to be a completely inclusive, underlying reality.  

McLaren calls his position “ethical universalism” because it removes the dualism of us-versus-them and asks: “How can the [K]ingdom of God more fully come on earth as it is in heaven, and how should disciples of the [K]ingdom live to enter and welcome the [K]ingdom?” McLaren believes in a sort of heaven on earth, whereby God’s Kingdom gradually pervades this world: “What if the [K]ingdom of God is always emerging, and will always be emerging? What if there is no perfection point at which [one can] say, ‘Perfection has arrived. From now on, nothing can ever change again, because the only change possible is for the worse’? What if the [K]ingdom of God is a story, not a state - a process, not a stasis?” Given that the world is far from reaching a state of perfection in the near future, it remains unclear how it might ever reach that state given McLaren’s affirmation of human imperfection. McLaren acknowledges this concern but believes God is nevertheless directing humanity to strive for perfection:

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459 Brian McLaren, “Q & R: Kingdom . . . Could It have been Received?,” (14 September 2010) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-kingdom-could-it-have-been-r.html; Internet.
“Only God gets it right 100% of the time. [Human] morality is at best a poor approximation, and at worst, full of self-deceit and delusion. . . . God is bringing [people] along the way a parent brings along his or her children, so God calls [people] to a higher and higher morality.”

The Person of Christ

McLaren’s ethical universalism, which argues for the permanent invasion of God’s Kingdom into this present world, has been influenced by Newbigin who sought to overcome division between the sacred and the secular by combining salvation history and human history into a seamless history and, by doing so, concludes that “true theology does not begin in the realm of ideas. It begins with praxis.”

Ethical universalism unites

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460 Brian McLaren, “Q & R: Hell, etc.” (30 September 2009) [on-line]; accessed 12 March 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-hell-etc.html#more; Internet.

461 Newbigin, Open Secret, 95; McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 105; Walter Rauschenbusch, The Social Principles of Jesus (New York: National Board of the Young Women's Christian Associations, 1916), 76; Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel, 233. Many of McLaren’s teachings on the Kingdom of God are quite similar to those of Walter Rauschenbusch even though McLaren never acknowledges his influence. Like McLaren, Rauschenbusch focuses on Jesus’ pronouncement of the Kingdom of God as a present reality as the centerpiece of his theology. This teaching, he acknowledges, “combines religion, social science, and ethical action in a perfect synthesis.” This allows him to focus his theology on the restoration of the Kingdom of God in this present reality through acts of love and justice. His subjugation of Scripture to objective knowledge derived from science and history allows him to downplay critical components of traditional Christian eschatologies which focus of judgment and the destruction of this world. Rauschenbusch’s theology appears to promote an ethical universalism which bears a marked degree of similarity to that of McLaren. He acknowledges that at least some sinners deserve a degree of punishment beyond this life but also argues against the finality of hell for unrepentant sinners: “It would be more satisfactory for modern minds and for Christian minds to think of an unlimited scale of ascent toward God, reaching from the lowest to the highest, within which every spirit would hold the place for which it was fitted, and each could advance as it grew. This would satisfy [their] sense of justice. Believers in the social gospel will probably agree that some people have deserved hell
all people through action instead of demanding adherence to particular doctrines arising from Scripture regarding the person of Christ. As McLaren puts it, “Christ being the way to God doesn’t have to mean that all have to know Christ by name.”

Besides ignoring Christ’s person, ethical universalism, according to Abigail Tucker, leads to “a feel-good Christianity . . . [that] questions the idea of hell and claims that, through human love, heaven can be lived on earth.” McLaren wants people to “learn” about God’s forgiveness through Christ, but, in the end, he fails to say that they must accept it; instead, he argues that this aspect of the gospel is nothing more than a “footnote” to the call to become a disciple who engages in good works. McLaren appeals to Christ Himself for his definition of good works, “For Jesus, good meant helping the poor and healing the sick and seeking through love to transform the status quo.” Since McLaren affirms the importance of God’s forgiveness through Christ as well as His call to active obedience, it would help to consider how McLaren understands salvation in Scripture.

and ought to get theirs. But no man, in any human sense of justice, has deserved an eternity of hell. On the other hand, it jars [their] sense of justice to see some individuals go to heaven totally exempt.”

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462 McLaren “Q & R: The Pluralism Question.”


464 Sweet et al., Church in Emerging Culture, 215.

465 McLaren, Last Word and the Word after that, 63.
**Salvation in Scripture**

In the OT, McLaren believes that salvation meant rescue from “enemies and violence” and other sufferings common to humanity as opposed to salvation from hell.\(^{466}\) In the NT, the biblical word often translated as “save,” McLaren argues, means “‘rescue’ or ‘heal’” and does not mean “‘save from hell’ or ‘give eternal life after death.’”\(^{467}\) In context, McLaren believes it refers to rescuing from troubles such as “sickness, war, political intrigue, oppression, poverty, imprisonment, or any kind of danger or evil.”\(^{468}\)

By interpreting salvation this way, God’s judgment, in McLaren’s thought, becomes a form of salvation whereby God’s “truth and justice” invades this world causing those who do wrong to experience consequences for their deeds so as to keep them from continuing in their behavior and causing those who do right to be vindicated.\(^{469}\) His reasoning follows that of Newbigin who argues,


\(^{467}\) McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 93; idem, “On Pandora, Congo, the Gulf, and Wall Street” [on-line]; accessed 31 October 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/on-pandora-congo-the-gulf-and-wa.html; Internet; idem, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 50-56. According to McLaren, “[T]he tree of life” in Genesis 3 points out “that what matters most is not profit, but a sacred connection . . . connection to God, to one another, to all of creation.” While he acknowledges that the tree of life leads to physical death, he does not believe that Adam and Eve’s separation from the tree of life entailed a separation from God which would result in eternal death apart from God’s grace: “[T]he biblical text never hints that [Adam and Eve’s separation] entails an ‘ontological fall’ from Platonic being and transcendent state down into Aristotelian becoming and debased story.” Rather, McLaren believes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve recounts the amazing grace of God and His commitment to ongoing reconciliation: “[I]t’s the story of a good creation marred by expanding human evil, countered by divine faithfulness, leading to profound reconciliation and healing.”

\(^{468}\) Ibid.

\(^{469}\) Ibid.
[T]he eschaton is always present as judgment, death, and resurrection for each moment of history. It is a new, vertical dimension by which history is constantly being judged and re-created. Thus the Christian’s duty is not to rest hope on the unrealized future: the future can give [people] nothing that [they] have not already got. [The Christian’s] duty is to seek perfection now at every moment in concrete obedience to the will of God. By so doing one is living in the eschatological order.  

Like Newbigin, McLaren believes in a partially realized eschatology that propounds God’s restoration of the present world to its original perfection, calls on humanity to assist God in his restorative work, and confers salvation to all humanity. McLaren’s views on salvation can be more clearly seen through his interpretation of biblical concepts of sin, repentance, and being born again.

**Interpretation of Sin**

McLaren declares, “[I]n the Bible there’s not a lot of definition of sin.” Even so, he does offer some insight into what he believes to be the biblical understanding of sin:

One is the Greek word *hamartano*, which means missing the mark, wandering from the path, or going astray. Another word is *hustereo*, which means falling short or not going far enough. If *hamartano* is going off the path, *hustereo* is stopping short on the path of your final destination. Another word, *parabasis*, is almost the opposite of that. It means going beyond your destination, or beyond where you should stop. One other word is *akatharsia*. The word catharsis means purification; *akatharsia* is pollution. It means being unpurified or being made dirty or polluted. So here you have four different ways of understanding what sin is. It's straying from the path; it's falling short, not going as far as you should; it's going too far; or it's being polluted and dirty.

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472 Ibid.
Kenneth S. Wuest presents seven different terms for sin used in the Greek NT and ascribes different meanings to these terms based on his extensive studies of the Greek language throughout the Mediterranean world and the Bible. The word for sin used most often in the NT is ἁμαρτίας, which, according to Wuest, “means a missing of the goal comfortable to and fixed by God.” Another word for sin, ἁμάρτημα, refers to deeds of disobedience. A third word, παρακοή, denotes “the idea of active disobedience which follows on [an] inattentive or careless hearing, being super induced upon the word.” A fourth term for sin, ἄνομία, is an antonym of righteousness and connotes the idea of “contempt or violation of law, lawlessness.” The fifth word, παράβασις, means to “transgress” or “violate” law. Sixth, παράπτωμα means “a lapse or deviation from the truth and uprightness.” A seventh term for sin, ἁγνομα, means “to sin through ignorance.” The final term, ἠττημα, carries “the ethical sense of coming short of one’s duty.”

In fairness to McLaren, he frequently admits his lack of theological education and background; however, differences between his understanding of sin and that of Wuest deserve consideration. McLaren views sin largely as an impediment to the journey with God and calls on people to stay on the path. The biblical view of sin, however, incorporates the idea of personal disobedience to God by transgressing His commands and thereby failing to live up to His standard of holiness. Since sin is defined as personal disobedience, it causes a break in the relationship between God and humanity and therefore requires repentance. The next section will consider the biblical meaning of repentance in comparison to McLaren’s view.

Interpretation of Repentance

In the OT, בּושׁ is most commonly associated with human repentance. In historical books and the prophets, it carries a sense of shame and “means to be disgraced for something that has been undertaken” according to Horst Seebass.474 Philip J. Nel agrees and adds “always has to do with a negative condition or experience as a result of a relationship in which perceived codes of conduct, honor, position, or expectations are not fully met or are violated.”475 When employed, it indicates a complete change in heart which results in obedience to God.476

The theme of repentance (μετάνοια) occurs frequently in the Gospels and Acts but only rarely in the Epistles, a fact which indicates a relationship between repentance and coming to Christian faith since most of the Epistles were addressed to Christians. Paul’s application of repentance to Christians was a call to heed the Holy Spirit’s direction and to be reconciled to God and others through obedience to Christ (Rom 8:5-8; 2 Cor 5: 18-19; Phil 2:4-5). Gross Alexander, who acknowledges the Kingdom of God as a unifying theme in the Gospels, defines “repentance, as conceived and taught by Jesus,


meant a change of the whole life, so as to subject it and to conform it to God, a radical
and complete revolution of one’s view of God and attitude toward God.”

According to Murray, repentance (and repent) in the NT “refer[s] basically to a
change of mind. . . . [R]epentance consists in a radical transformation of thought, attitude,
outlook, and direction.” Wuest applies Murray’s definition to the usage of μετάνοια
and its verb form in classical Greek and prefers to limit its meaning in the NT to religious
matters:

They refer there to a change of moral thought and reflection which follows moral
delinquency. This includes not only the act of changing one’s attitude towards and
opinion of sin but also that of forsaking it. Sorrow and contrition with respect to sin,
are included in the Bible idea of repentance, but these follow and are consequent
upon the sinner’s change of mind with respect to it.

McLaren agrees with this understanding of repentance; however, he believes in
a human source instigating repentance. Repentance, he says, “means to rethink—to
reconsider [one’s] direction and consider a new one, to admit that [one] might be wrong,
to give [one’s] life a second thought, [and] to think about [one’s] thinking.”

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480 McLaren, “Ur Video: Brian McLaren on Being a Heretic”; idem, Generous Orthodoxy, 95.

481 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 47; idem, Generous Orthodoxy, 267. His interpretation of repentance and ‘born again’ seems to have developed drastically. In Generous Orthodoxy, McLaren says, “Christians (rightly) tell non-Christian individuals that they must repent to be ‘born again.’
McLaren is suggesting that the direct source of repentance is the human mind, then his teaching would not match his claim that salvation is by grace because his understanding of repentance involves work within the human mind.

To clarify the meaning of repentance further, McLaren implies that one who acknowledges they have been wrong in the past and may be so again and who accepts Christ’s salvation has repented.482 This repentance, which is based on “self-doubt,” may lead to a faith in God that is based on “believing in God” and “the good news of the [K]ingdom” as opposed to believing specific doctrines about God or the Kingdom.483 If McLaren’s view of repentance does not arise in response to particular doctrine, then how can his position ever equate to biblical repentance which calls humanity back to obedience to God’s revealed Word.

**Interpretation of Born Again**

To articulate his definition of repentance further, McLaren ascribes repentance and ‘born again’ similar meanings because he defines both in terms of rethinking one’s present course and choosing a better way. In 2001, he defines ‘born again’ as “a radical humbling, a going back to the beginning, [and] becoming a little child rather than a big religious scholar.”484 Later he says that it means “to become a learner” by abandoning your previous notions of truth and accept your new, life long journey in search for


483 Ibid., 108-109. As discussed previously, simply believing in God was condemned by the Apostle James who declared such faith to be that of demons.

To be ‘born again,’ McLaren argues, one must first “unlearn everything” and learn to think correctly. McLaren rejects conservative evangelical understanding of ‘born again’ and calls it a “punctiliar salvation” that teaches that humanity is separated from God at birth and must experience a new birth by turning back to God.

Instead of being “born again,” McLaren argues that Christians should “be born again, again, and again . . . into a lifelong experiential learning adventure of discipleship.” Those who enter discipleship, according to McLaren, “are learners (and nonlearners) who have started on a rigorous and unending journey or quest in relation to Jesus Christ.” These disciples are engaged in “[g]ood thinking (orthodoxy), good being (orthopathy), . . . good relating (ortho-affinity), . . . [and] good work and practice (orthopraxy).”

Given McLaren’s reinterpretation of ‘born again,’ one ought to consider its meaning based on an evaluation of biblical evidence. John 3:3-8 is a primary text used in interpreting the meaning of ‘born again.’ In this verse, Jesus says, “no one can see the [K]ingdom of God unless they are born again.” In John 3:3 and 3:7, ‘born (γεννάω) again’ refers to the concept of a new birth which begins with God (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7)

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485 McLaren, More Ready than You Realize, 36.


487 McLaren, More Ready than You Realize, 106.


489 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 28; idem, Story We Find Ourselves in, 120. McLaren clearly states, “‘disciple’ means ‘learner.’”

490 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 29.
and His Spirit (John 3:5, 6, 8).  

1 Peter 1:3 and 1:23 use a slightly different term for born again, ἄναγεννάω, which refers to “a person [being] inwardly transformed through a believing acceptance of the word of God” and occurs “through the living and enduring word of God.”  

Some debate also exists on whether or not γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν in John 3:3 and 3:7 should be translated as “born again” or as “born from above.” While most English translations prefer “born again,” Friedrich Büschel presents a compelling case for the latter translation. He notes that John uses ἄνωθεν as an adverb of place in 3:31 and 19:11, 23 and “always describes birth in terms of its origin” (1:13; 3:5-6; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:18).

According to McLaren, Jesus, when speaking about new birth in 3:3, offers a new life in temporal creation. While McLaren appropriately gives the Lord credit for work involved in new birth, he interprets the meaning of ‘born again’ by presuming that this world will be fully restored. Christ’s exact meaning remains somewhat ambiguous until He explains Himself in John 3:5-8 where he connects new birth with the indwelling of God’s Spirit. In John 3:7-8, William Hendrickson points out that the Spirit’s work in


new birth demonstrates that being born again is the work of God in the human heart through His Spirit. In 1 Peter 1:22-23, Peter says that those who are born again receive new birth from an imperishable source which enables them to love their neighbor. Given new birth’s imperishable source, one wonders how McLaren can argue for new birth being an ongoing process.

**Salvation for All Creation**

Perhaps the reason McLaren is able to portray repentance and new birth as an ongoing process of rethinking is because he rejects the doctrine of original sin and affirms original goodness for all people. McLaren believes original goodness is “inherent to all things in God's good world.” McLaren characterizes the original fall of humanity as it is told in Scripture as a breach in relationship between God and people brought on by the human tendency to self-destruct.

After labeling the fall of humanity and the doctrine of the original sin as post-biblical Greco-Roman constructions, McLaren argues that God is a compassionate Being who participated in humanity’s plight in the person of Christ because He wants reconciliation with humanity. Reconciliation, for McLaren, is built on his understanding of sin. In his discussion of Adam and Eve’s sin, McLaren notes a “sense of shame and

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496 McLaren’s affirmation of the presence of original goodness within humanity is not a declaration that they are without sin.

497 McLaren, “Breathtaking Beauty.”

alienation from God” but fails to mention guilt and the corresponding divine justice due to God’s holiness. McLaren later expands upon his understanding of alienation from God that befell humanity in Eden: He believes that a “deep alienation” occurred but stops short of calling it a complete alienation. Guy P. Waters observes, McLaren “focuses . . . upon the psychological and social consequences of sin” to the exclusion of eternal consequences.

Rejection of Original Sin

Nevertheless, he encourages people to “face some ugliness” within themselves and make some changes. He also affirms that sin itself is completely depraved, but then fails to attach total depravity to humanity: “Human sin is awful and reprehensible beyond words, and the whole earthly creation suffers because of it.” McLaren affirms sin’s existence but rejects the doctrine of original sin because it teaches total depravity and condemns everyone to hell except for a believing remnant.

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499 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 27.

500 McLaren “McLarenCast: Episode 2, Part 3.”

501 Waters, “It’s ‘Wright,’ but is It Right?,” 199.


503 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 234.

McLaren expands this ugliness to include culture as well and declares that Jesus came to redeem it by bringing forth the Kingdom of God and removing its sin. To overcome spiritual blindness brought on by culture, McLaren trusts in guidance of God’s Spirit even while people remain within their respective cultures. Therefore, McLaren sees no problem with Christians remaining culturally Buddhist or culturally Muslim. Several years later, McLaren reiterates his point by saying disciples of Christ are not “adherents to the Christian religion” because “people [can] become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts.” McLaren’s placement of Christianity on the same plain as other religions arises, in Albert J. Dager’s estimation, from redefinition of evil as simply that which is harmful to creation instead of conceiving evil as that which places one’s soul in eternal peril, an act which McLaren expressly condemns: “One of the most dangerous things in the world—maybe even the most dangerous—is to redefine sin to suit [one’s] own tastes.”

Through deconstruction, McLaren arrives at his interpretation of original sin in the creation story as a “story of a good creation marred by expanding human evil,

505 McLaren, *Story We Find Ourselves in*, 34; idem, *New Kind of Christian*, 74-75.


507 Ibid.


countered by divine faithfulness, leading to a profound reconciliation and healing."\(^{510}\) His employment of deconstruction is his desire to see “the biblical values of goodness and justice” become the primary emphasis of God’s people.\(^{511}\) McLaren’s emphasis, according to Wittmer, may have arisen from his resentment of the modern quest for right belief arising from logic because he believes this pursuit led to injustice and favors the liberal focus on social action because of his “greater concern for Christian ethics than its traditional doctrines.”\(^{512}\)

**Goodness of Creation**

Another motive for McLaren’s rejection of the doctrine of original sin is its portrayal of all creation as completely evil with absolutely no inherent goodness.\(^{513}\) In an effort to change the doctrine to make it more appealing to postmodernists, McLaren minimizes the original sin of Adam and Eve by focusing on sins of humanity as a whole and believes that God’s punishment for sins of humanity is temporal suffering as opposed to separation from God in hell.\(^{514}\) Instead of the original sin being the common problem


\(^{511}\) Ibid., 76.


\(^{513}\) McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 234-35.

\(^{514}\) McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 78.
of all humanity (individuals and communities), the common problem, McLaren offers, is sin’s effects on creation as a whole.\footnote{Ibid., 79.}

To solve the problem, McLaren extends salvation to all creation: “Jesus really was, and \textit{is}, about saving more than just human souls after they die. He really \textit{is} about saving the world—human history [and] creation.”\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Story We Find Ourselves in}, 165; Walter Rauschenbusch, “The Brotherhood of the Kingdom,” in \textit{Walter Rauschenbusch: Selected Writings}, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson, Sources of American Spirituality, ed. John Farina (Brotherhood Leaflet No. 2, Rauschenbusch Scrapbook in the Colgate Rochester Divinity School Library: n.d.; reprint, New York: Paulist, 1984), 75. Emphasis is his; Like McLaren, Rauschenbusch also accused the church of often being solely focused on the salvation of souls unto eternal life beyond this present world. He believed that the Kingdom of God brought a wholistic salvation to this current world including the “political, industrial, social, scientific, and artistic life of humanity.”} Again, McLaren reiterates his position on this matter: “[T]he incarnation of Christ is” about “God entering creation” and “God taking creation, including human history, into [H]is heart, and declaring eternal solidarity with it.”\footnote{Ibid.}

\textbf{Reconciliation of Humanity}

While developing his view of the gospel as the Kingdom of God, McLaren begins to argue that all are forgiven for their sins and are now reconciled to God despite his earlier comments on sin’s ugliness and presentation of Christ as the only way.\footnote{McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 154.} McLaren at first finds it difficult to explain Christ’s death to postmodernists except to say
that Jesus Himself did not have an answer in the Garden of Gethsemane.\textsuperscript{519} Then, McLaren proffers what he calls “‘powerful weakness’ theory” which holds that Christ’s death exhibits God’s forgiving nature, his preference for sacrifice over violence, and his extreme willingness to broker reconciliation even if it requires extreme suffering.”\textsuperscript{520} This theory presents God as a compassionate Being who participated in humanity’s plight in the person of Christ because He wants reconciliation with humanity. McLaren implies people can still choose not to have reconciliation but remains uncertain about their destiny including those who have never heard.\textsuperscript{521} Several years later, however, McLaren becomes confident that reconciliation, purchased by Christ’s blood, becomes automatic for all humanity and creation as well.\textsuperscript{522} In 2010, he states that Christ’s death demonstrates His self-giving example to which all humanity is called upon to imitate.\textsuperscript{523}

McLaren’s rejection of the doctrine of original sin allows him to affirm an ongoing relationship between God and humanity. His denial of the eternal consequences of sin and his acceptance of eternal security as a given for all humanity allows all people to participate in God’s Kingdom presently without fear of condemnation for their beliefs and actions. With this in mind, evangelists, McLaren observes, need only inform

\textsuperscript{519}Ibid., 80-81.

\textsuperscript{520}McLaren, \textit{Story We Find Ourselves in}, 105.

\textsuperscript{521}Ibid., 107, 170-71.

\textsuperscript{522}McLaren and Campolo, \textit{Adventures in Missing the Point}, 23; McLaren, \textit{Everything Must Change}, 79.

\textsuperscript{523}McLaren, \textit{360 Theology}.
everyone that they are now reconciled to God and call upon them to accept reconciliation.\textsuperscript{524}

\section*{Instrumental Election}

Since evangelists become limited only to task of informing others of their present reconciliation with God, McLaren alters the doctrine of election and argues that Christians are simply blessed \textit{instrumentally} not \textit{exclusively}.\textsuperscript{525} In his blog, McLaren discusses his position more clearly: “[E]lection is not to bliss but to service, and it is not exclusive but instrumental. In whatever ways God chooses some, they are chosen to bring blessing to all. . . [B]eing chosen is a call not elite status and privilege, but to responsibility.”\textsuperscript{526}

McLaren credits Barth and Newbigin’s influence in the formation of his views on election.\textsuperscript{527} Whereas Calvin only included a chosen few in the election, Barth expanded election to include all people and connected election within churches to the call

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{524} McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 154.

\textsuperscript{525} McLaren, \textit{Story We Find Ourselves in}, 64. Emphasis is his.

\textsuperscript{526} McLaren “Q & R: Original Sin and Responsibility.”

\textsuperscript{527} Brian McLaren, “Q & R: Karl Barth and Universal Salvation” [on-line]; accessed 14 July 2011; available from http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-karl-barth-and-universal-sal.html; Internet. McLaren says that Barth “opens doors for people to escape from a terribly misguided understanding of election - what Lesslie Newbigin called ‘the greatest heresy in the history of monotheism’ – the idea that God chooses some for elite privilege and others for damnation. Newbigin said . . . that the biblical understanding of election is not being chosen instead of others, but on behalf of others. It means being chosen for service, not just privilege.”
\end{quote}
to serve others by sharing the gospel with them.\textsuperscript{528} For Newbigin, biblical calling to

election is a call to be “trustees on behalf of all the nations” because “election is for

responsibility, not privilege.”\textsuperscript{529} Newbigin believes election to be a controlling theme in
the Bible because he understands it to mean “God’s universal way of salvation,” which is

centered in Christ and unites both the particular and the universal.\textsuperscript{530} Despite what
appears to be a truly universalist position, Newbigin, like McLaren, stops short of it only
by acknowledging a lack of certainty concerning “salvation of other people.”\textsuperscript{531} McLaren
dislikes the doctrine of election because it teaches that God excludes some people in

favor of others, a teaching which conflicts with his view of God’s oneness with
creation.\textsuperscript{532}

\textsuperscript{528}Barth, CD, vol. 2, The Doctrine of God, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (1957),
pt. 2:195-97. According to Barth, “Included in His election there is, therefore, this
“other” election, the election of the many (from whom none is excluded) whom the
electing God meets on this way.” The church as “the inner circle” of the elect “is to be
described as mediate and mediating in respect to its mission and function. It is mediate,
that is, in so far as it is the middle point between the election of Jesus Christ and
(included in this) the election of those who have believed, and do and will believe, in
Him. It is mediating in so far as the relation between the election of Jesus Christ and that
of all believers (and vice versa) is mediated and conditioned by it.” The church “has been
chosen out of the world for the very purpose of performing for the world the service
which it most needs and which consists simply in giving it the testimony of Jesus Christ
and summoning it to faith in Him. It has forgotten and forfeited its election if it is found
existing for itself only and omitting this service, if it is no longer really mediating. The
inner circle is nothing apart from the relation to the outer circle of the election which has
taken place (and takes place) in Jesus Christ.” Emphasis is his.

\textsuperscript{529}Newbigin, Open Secret, 17, 32; Brian McLaren, “Q & R: Newbigin.”
McLaren acknowledges the influence of Newbigin’s Open Secret on his thoughts.

\textsuperscript{530}Newbigin, Open Secret, 68-71.

\textsuperscript{531}Ibid., 78-79.

\textsuperscript{532}Brian D. McLaren, “Chosen for What?,” Tikkun (May/June 2008) [on-line];
accessed 10 March 2011; available from http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/McLaren-
Chapter Summary

Neoorthopraxy becomes a new postmodern orthodoxy which promotes an orthopraxy that separates it from *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. This type of orthodoxy placing the referent outside of Scripture allows an individual to seek the Bible’s missional message by what McLaren calls a missional hermeneutic without ever having to affirm to particular doctrines. Since McLaren refuses to affirm any particular doctrines as orthodox, he redefines orthopraxy by using a pragmatic theory of truth which determines right actions based on their perceived benefits.

Experience, therefore, becomes truth’s sole arbiter and the missional hermeneutic becomes a hermeneutic based upon individual (and communal) experience. McLaren’s approach to Scripture bears a great deal of similarity to the SGM which, under influence of higher criticism, emphasized social action and placed much of Scripture in the category of myth. McLaren’s postmodern epistemology prevents him from placing truth into categories of myth and fact, so he prefers to view Scripture as a narrative which conceals truth and renders it a mystery to human intellect. Doctrines become myths and the social gospel in the postmodern era becomes neoorthopraxy.

Since neoorthopraxy follows the social gospel in its overarching focus on social action, *sola fide*, which has already been undermined by postmodern epistemology, must be either extinguished or redefined. McLaren chooses to redefine faith as a “relative certainty” and thereby allows everyone to admit that they can never be certain about any Christian teaching or anything else for that matter. McLaren hopes, however, that one’s relative faith will lead them to engage in social action. Relative faith fits well into his________________________

Chosenforwhat; Internet.
neoorthopraxy because it encourages social action but allows experience to determine which action is beneficial because relative faith offers no truth to serve as a definitive guide in determining one’s course of action. Experience once again becomes the sole arbiter of truth because McLaren’s faith elevate search for truth and accompanying doubt as central tenet in his doctrine of *sola fide*.

McLaren attempts to unify Christian communities and the world around his postmodern version of *sola fide* doctrine by removing affirmation of particular doctrines as the requirement for unity and replacing it with a call to engage in social action within the Kingdom of God. Only those who choose to remain excluded or choose to exclude others are somehow left out of the unifying call within the Kingdom of God. In addition, McLaren’s call to action includes everyone, unless they choose not to participate, in a sort of heaven on earth in this life and the next. This position, which McLaren calls “ethical universalism,” arises from the redefinition of salvation. Salvation, in McLaren’s view, means the rescue of all creation by God through Christ from social injustice. It avoids any connection with final condemnation of sin and the corresponding separation from God that such a connotation invariably holds.

For McLaren, sin becomes a mere impediment to his journey and practice of faith in this life and has no final effect on his relationship with God. McLaren redefines repentance and ‘born again’ in terms of rethinking again and again one’s beliefs as they continue their journey of faith. In this way, the person of faith comes to be viewed as a learner in need of divine assistance to acquire knowledge as opposed to a vile sinner who is in desperate need of divine agent to deliver them from any eternal consequences of sin. Consequences of sin no longer lead to final condemnation because McLaren rejects
original sin and affirms original goodness of creation before humanity’s fall to still be a present within creation as a whole and within humanity as well. Given McLaren’s view of humanity and creation, he denies the doctrine of election in favor of instrumental election which focuses on the works of humanity in this life to restore creation back to its original state.
CHAPTER 4
NEOORTHOPRAXY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

To support neoorthopraxy, McLaren applies the Kingdom of God as his biblical hermeneutic. This chapter discusses McLaren’s development of this hermeneutic which contrasts with the Four Spiritual Laws (basic theology for conservative evangelicals) and refocuses evangelism on social action. Then, it explores McLaren’s understanding of the Kingdom of God invitation as a pronouncement of reconciliation between a loving God and humanity and how his pronouncement is informed by his soteriology. Finally, it analyzes the connection between his invitation and his eschatology.

The ‘Kingdom of God’ Metanarrative

McLaren’s understanding of postmodern epistemology led him to deconstruct many doctrines from the modern era that rendered Christianity an exclusive religion. McLaren’s rejection of the doctrines of sola scriptura, sola fide, and original sin have been discussed. Since McLaren no longer holds to these foundational beliefs upon which much of orthodox Christianity has been built, he is forced to look for a new foundation to articulate his Christianity. This section documents McLaren’s deconstruction of the old metanarrative, which includes most doctrines associated historically with Christian orthodoxy. In its place, McLaren develops a new metanarrative that avoids any and all doctrines that promote exclusivity.
Deconstruction of the Old Metanarrative

Old Christianity, according to McLaren, has become ineffective in attracting much of the current generation, and therefore, a new Christianity needs to be developed, “not a new religion per se, but a new framework for [its] theology.”\(^{533}\) Theology, McLaren opines, needs to be changed because it is simply no longer effective and has always been an ongoing, never-to-be finished task.\(^{534}\) In 1999, he told Christians that they “must accept the challenge of abandoning [their] old ways of being Christian for a new kind of Christianity.”\(^{535}\)

Rejection of the Four Spiritual Laws

In the same year, McLaren casts suspicion over the “usefulness” of the Four Spiritual Laws because he considered them to be a product of modernity.\(^{536}\) In 2001, McLaren again sounds an alarm: “Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, untrue, or [the] modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision.”\(^{537}\) The following year, McLaren declares “that Paul never shared ‘the Four Spiritual Laws,’” a statement which implies that Paul was not teaching orthodox Christianity.\(^{538}\) Approximately one year later, McLaren labels the Four Spiritual

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\(^{533}\) McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church*, 12-14.

\(^{534}\) Ibid., 18, 65.


\(^{536}\) Ibid., 41.


\(^{538}\) McLaren, *More Ready than You Realize*, 146.
Laws a modernist construction which is very suspicious.\footnote{McLaren and Campolo, \textit{Adventures in Missing the Point}, 239-40.}

In a posting on his blog, McLaren agrees that emergents do not believe the Four Spiritual Laws or the Roman Road to Salvation “are bad – just that many of [them] have an understanding of ‘the gospel’ today that isn’t exactly the same as what Martin Luther or John Calvin or Menno Simons or St. Teresa of Avila or St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Francis or Augustine or St. Gregory of Nyssa or Origen might have held to be ‘the gospel.’”\footnote{Brian McLaren, “Q & A: What Do ‘Emergents’ Mean” [on-line]; accessed 13 March 2011; available from http://www.brianchurch.net/archives/blog/q-a-what-do-emergents-mean.html; Internet.}

\textbf{Nonfoundationalist Theology}

According to Belcher, postmodernism focuses on deconstructing truths propounded in the age of rationalism but struggles to reconstruct a new foundation for truth since “it cannot and does not provide an outside authority to guide life in community.”\footnote{Belcher, \textit{Deep Church}, 82.}

When postmodern deconstruction is applied to Scripture, the result is what Franke calls nonfoundationalist theology [where] all beliefs are open to criticism and reconstruction. . . Nonfoundationalist theology does not eschew convictions and commitments; it simply maintains that all such convictions and commitments, even the most long-standing and dear, remain subject to ongoing critical scrutiny and the possibility of revision, reconstruction, and even rejection.\footnote{Franke, \textit{The Character of Theology}, 78; McLaren, \textit{Generous Orthodoxy}, 153; McLaren, \textit{New Kind of Christianity}, 272. McLaren affirms his indebtedness to Franke’s work.}
Nonfoundationalist theology, Franke adds, requires no authority, “be it Scripture, tradition, reason, or experience, but only the living God.”

In response to Franke, White wonders how such an authority can be brought into operation in the church giving its lack of precision since God is disconnected from His Word due to perceived inability of humans to comprehend God’s Word. This type of theology, however, is appealing to postmodernists because of their strong aversion to commitment. According to Brewin, Emergent churches have embraced postmodern epistemology and now looks to all sources for conceptions of truth: “There will no longer be a single external authority to which people look for truth, but rather a distributed network of authorities that people look to in order to assimilate multiple perspectives on truth.”

Burke and Pepper agree but add that “postmodern Christians ultimately will retain at least one absolute, Jesus Christ!” McLaren himself affirms Christ as absolute, but as previously mentioned, he construes Christ as a personal Subject who cannot be objectively identified. Without objective identification of Christ’s attributes, it would be impossible to construct a foundation of belief concerning His person.

While his position calls them to pursue truth as they engage in social action, his view of God can never provide a sure foundation since he remains skeptical of any truth, even one that declares God to be loving and non-condemning. With the concept of

\[543\] Franke, The Character of Theology, 78-79.


\[545\] Brewin, Signs of Emergence, 110.

\[546\] Burke and Pepper, Making Sense of Church, 27.
divine revelation in Scripture being a matter of conjecture, McLaren’s theology based on a loving God and devoid of exclusive truth claims allows for new truths:

[N]ew challenges and opportunities requires Christian leaders to create new forms, new methods, new structures—and it requires them to find new content, new ideas, new truths, new meaning to bring to bear on the new challenges. These new messages are not incompatible with the gospel of the kingdom Jesus taught. No, they are inherent in it, but previously undiscovered, unexpressed, perhaps unimagined. Jesus’ original message was pregnant with all that they would need, but there was much, Jesus said, that they could not yet bear to hear, and so Jesus would send the Spirit of truth to guide them into all truth as they needed it and were ready to bear it. 547

During the process of finding new truths, Christians, McLaren declares, have the Holy Spirit to serve as their guide “into new, previously unknown truth, truth that has been hidden in Christ all along.” New truths, viewed this way, are simply new to the human agent for they have always been a part of Christ’s revelation. 548

**Rejection of Metanarratives**

Commenting on McLaren’s deconstructionism, Groothuis concludes, “No one ‘metanarrative’ (or worldview) can rightly claim to be a true and rational account of reality.” 549 The lack of metanarrative, according to Jean-François Lyotard, is a defining characteristic of postmodernism, and according to Liederbach and Reid, it is a defining characteristic of emergents. 550 Echoing Lyotard’s rejection of metanarratives, the Bible’s

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548 Ibid., 193.

549 Groothuis, “Truth Defined and Defended,” 60.

purpose, McLaren argues, is to allow for many “local narratives” as opposed to a central metanarrative, which is known only to God. In 2003, McLaren still lacks a metanarrative and therefore believes “anyone [may] offer a story and see if it resonates or rings true with hearers... [T]his story [is formed] by looking for patterns in the contemporary culture, by studying history, by looking for trends, and through intuition... [O]ver time, ... the story can become more accurate and engaging.” In 2010, McLaren rejects metanarratives especially those related to orthodox Christianity and promotes a Kingdom of God theology as a replacement. Despite his rejection of metanarratives, his newfound theology may end up becoming a new metanarrative.

**Construction of the New Metanarrative**

After deconstructing old metanarratives and rejecting the existence of metanarratives, McLaren begins to develop a new one based on his incarnational theology. He strongly favors an incarnational theology because of its emphasis on Christ’s work in this world and corresponding responsibility of His followers to do likewise: “[T]he truth of God can never be limited to propositions—it always is expressed in incarnation and action and relationships as well.”

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553 Brian McLaren, *360 Church: Generous Church*, Faithworks 2010 [MP3].

554 McLaren, Pagitt, and Stetzer, “A Snapshot of the Emergent Church,” 22; McLaren, “Ur Video: Brian McLaren on Being a Heretic.” In this video, McLaren and McKnight agree that theology must lead to action.
theology, however, includes the development of a proper eschatological theology as Kevin Ward suggests.\textsuperscript{555} Unfortunately, McLaren’s eschatology becomes subservient to his incarnational theology because he rejects traditional eschatologies that affirm eventual destruction of this world and promotes a partially realized eschatology that has people participating together with God presently in God’s Kingdom in restoring the present creation.\textsuperscript{556}

**The Kingdom of God as the Sole Metanarrative**

The Kingdom of God, therefore, becomes a metanarrative “of God for creation, God with creation, God in creation. This healing narrative, it seems to [McLaren], is actually even more deeply rooted in our religious traditions, it’s just that

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\textsuperscript{555} Kevin Ward, “It Might Be Emerging, but Is It Church?,” *Stimulus* 17, no. 4 (2009): 8.

\textsuperscript{556} McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church*, 154-64; Sweet, McLaren, Haselmeyer, *A is for Abductive*, 113-14; McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 205; McLaren, *Story We Find Ourselves in*, 171-72; McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 237-38; McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 144; McLaren, *New Kind of Christianity*, 197; McLaren, “Brian McLaren: Q4 - The Jesus Question.” McLaren’s view of an incarnational eschatology was developed in his first book in which he declares, “the Incarnation is about God’s solidarity with [this] world.” This “[e]schatology of [h]ope” has God’s Kingdom being a present reality that is intimately connected with the temporal world. It is characterized by love and social action. McLaren admits being influenced in his eschatological views by Walter Brueggemann, Jürgen Moltmann, and Stanley Grenz and calls them “theologians of hope.” In *Everything Must Change*, he argues that traditional eschatologies exalt a violent view of God’s person and Christ’s second coming. In *A New Kind of Christianity*, McLaren deals with Christ’s second coming in relation to his eschatology by arguing that the “end of the world” will be the “end of the world as we know it.” In the video interview, McLaren states that he prefers the “first coming Jesus” because He “didn’t reject” or “exclude anybody” and presents God as loving and accepting.
they've been subverted.” Scott Bader-Saye acknowledges the appearance of this new metanarrative:

One of the most important theological shifts in the direction of generous orthodoxy is the conscious reframing of redemption in terms of the [K]ingdom of God. The work of Christ and the Spirit is no longer thought of primarily in terms of saving individual souls from an eternity in hell. On the contrary, salvation is not only individual, it is communal; not only eternal, but also temporal.

Instead of a gospel presentation which emphasizes forgiveness and the afterlife, the gospel, Rick Richardson argues with McLaren’s support, should be presented as a story of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Conversion to this story merely requires embarking on a search for Christ as opposed to accepting the Four Spiritual Laws.

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558 Bader-Saye, “Improvising Church,” 18.

559 Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 28-29.; Brian McLaren, Foreword to *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 9.7-9 McLaren instructs those who read Richardson’s book to “take [it] to heart and put it to practice.” According to Richardson, Christ’s gospel included forgiveness of sins and statements about the afterlife, but these were not His primary message. Instead, “Jesus’ main message was that the [K]ingdom or rule of God is at hand. The rule of God is the act of God to set things right and to make people and the world work as they were intended to work. So Jesus talked much more about this life than about the next, much more about changing this world than about giving [people] a free pass to the next.”

560 Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 28-29. Richardson argues for conversion to be viewed as a “journey” instead of “a one-time event” or a “decision”: “The new model [of conversion], a model based on the image of journey, sees all [people] as moving either toward the goal or away from the goal. If the goal is to be a wholehearted follower of Jesus, then [people] are at different points along the way. But the crucial question is whether [they] are moving toward the center and beginning to
Mohler points out that McLaren’s Kingdom of God metanarrative runs into direct confrontation with the orthodox Christian metanarrative commonly known as the Four Spiritual Laws (creation, fall, redemption, and consummation).\textsuperscript{561}

McLaren begins to view God’s Kingdom, which he describes as “God [is] for creation, God [is] with creation, God [is] in creation,” as the sole biblical metanarrative or “framing story,” especially in \textit{Everything Must Change}, a book in which it sets out to establish participation in social action as the unifying factor for all people.\textsuperscript{562} In an interview, he even calls God’s Kingdom “the central message of Jesus” and demonstrates how it became his hermeneutic.\textsuperscript{563} In \textit{A Generous Orthodoxy}, McLaren states emphatically that a “person can affiliate with Jesus in the [K]ingdom-of-God dimension without affiliating with [H]im in the religious kingdom of Christianity. In other words, . . .

follow in the footsteps of the Leader.”

\textsuperscript{561}Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”


Christianity is not the Kingdom of God. The ultimate reality is the Kingdom of God, and Christianity at its best is here to proclaim and lead people into the Kingdom.”

His rejection of metanarratives in A New Kind of Christianity is odd, especially when McLaren once again affirms God’s Kingdom as the biblical framing story of God’s good creation (by implication) while also expunging the “Greco-Roman framing story” which affirms original sin and its corresponding affect on creation. This framing story, which McLaren sometimes refers to as the “Greco-Roman narrative,” is synonymous with the Four Spiritual Laws. These Laws, McLaren argues, arose from Greek philosophy and Roman society.

The Greco-Roman narrative, in McLaren’s opinion, was not “explicitly taught in Scripture” by Moses, Jesus, or Paul nor was it affirmed by the Early Church. Rather, it arose from Platonius whose Neo-Platonism emphasized the nonmaterial nature of ultimate reality and Aristotle who considered present reality to be ultimately real.

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564 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 282.
565 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 43, 126, 265; idem, Secret Message of Jesus, 203; Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel, 212. Previous to this publication, McLaren had already developed his argument that creation is ultimately good. For McLaren, the Greco-Roman era for Christianity held to us-versus-them dualism where an “elite . . . saved” group condemns “the lost” and “the damned” with “oppression and violence” being the end result. Like McLaren, Rauschenbusch also credits the infusion of Greek culture into contemporary eschatologies which emphasize sin and hope for life beyond this world.
566 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 37.
567 Ibid., 37.
568 Ibid., 35.
569 Ibid., 37-38.
inherent dualism, McLaren states, in these two opposing views caused the Greco-Roman culture to become “habitually dualistic.” Over time, McLaren continues, the ongoing philosophical debate led to increasing “intellectual achievements” causing feelings of superiority and an over-confidence in the reliability of rational thought.

Some present-day Christians, who McLaren suggests may still be under the influence of the Greco-Roman narrative, perceive the Garden of Eden as a “perfect Platonic Garden” and the fall of humanity as a change to something less: “The Fall utterly transforms all of creation from something at perfect Platonic stasis and rest to something changeable, from something perfect, static, and pristine to something imperfect, dynamic, and decaying.” Hence, McLaren argues “terms like ‘the Fall’ and ‘original sin’” arise ultimately from Greco-Roman philosophy instead of the Bible. In addition to these concepts, McLaren also points out the Greco-Roman dualism in the orthodox view of salvation: “On an unconscious level, being forgiven, being saved, being born again, and being justified mean being rescued from the sad story of Aristotelian becoming and restored to the high, timeless plane of perfect Platonic being, so the creatures in question can be loved by [God] again.”

In response to a proposed connection between Christian Orthodoxy and the Greco-Roman worldview, Wills says, the “Greco-Roman narrative paradigm is a clumsy

570 Ibid., 38-39.
571 Ibid., 39.
572 Ibid., 41-42.
573 Ibid., 43.
574 Ibid.
invention that has had no existence in either in secular or religious history.”

Michael A. G. Haykin agrees and adds, “This is simply a new variant of the old charge of Hellenization raised by liberal theologians like Harnack. At best, it is uninformed; at worst, it is irresponsible.”

**Unity without Truth**

By doubting the Greco-Roman narrative, Christian Orthodoxy, and the Four Spiritual Laws, McLaren’s search for satisfactory theology within in any metanarrative can never end because he argues new truths are still waiting to be found. Perhaps this is why McLaren has gravitated toward Christ’s teaching of God’s Kingdom (and presumably the Apostles’ and Nicene Creed). Caputo, in a book with a foreword by McLaren, connects ‘Kingdom of God’ teaching with deconstruction: “The good news deconstruction bears to the church is to provide the hermeneutics of the [K]ingdom of God. The deconstruction of Christianity is not an attack on the church but a critique of the idols to which it is vulnerable—the literalism and authoritativism . . . with which the church . . . has . . . been entangled.”

In place of the “idols” of Orthodox Christianity, McLaren develops his new metanarrative in such a way that doctrinal affirmations remain elusive:

> ‘The [Ki]ngdom of God is always at hand—but it's never in hand,’ meaning that if [people] claim that [they have] got it captured in hand and stuffed in pocket, so that it’s in [their] possession, under [their] control, contained in [their] conceptual

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575 Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?”


framework, shrink-wrapped on [their] shelf of religious products, etc., [they have] surely broken, fragmented, and spoiled it and made it into ‘[their] doctrine’ so that it is no longer recognizable as ‘the good news of God.’

By completely dissolving truth within the Kingdom of God, McLaren is able to offer a metanarrative that includes everyone in unity with God, who calls upon everyone “to reconcile with God, one another, and creation, to defect from false stories that divide and destroy [them], and to join God in the healing of the world through love and the pursuit of justice and the common good.”

Unity is possible among all people in God’s Kingdom, as viewed by McLaren, because it “deemphasizes their focus on the impending judgment of God in the afterlife” and emphasizes the call to live incarnationally by “join[ing] Jesus in the work of the gospel in helping to solve global crises in the present.” In response, Ward points out that Jesus may have “live[d] incarnationally within the culture of the first-century Judaism, [but H]e also lived in considerable tension with most in that culture, at times spoke judgement [sic] on it, and ended up being rejected by it.”


579 McLaren, Everything Must Change, 295.


581 Ward, “It Might Be Emerging, but Is It Church?,” 8.
Justice without Condemnation

Giving his concern about injustice, McLaren, focuses his understanding of the gospel more on conditions within the present world:

[T]he gospel is about how the world will be saved from human sin and all that goes with it—human greed, human lust, human pride, human oppression, human hypocrisy and dishonesty, human violence and racism, human chauvinism, [and] human injustice. It’s answering the question, [h]ow will humanity be saved from humanity? How will earth be saved from evil within human individuals and human groups?\(^{582}\)

While McLaren acknowledges human sinfulness and even admits that forgiveness of sins is a part of salvation, he believes that effects of human sinfulness upon creation are central concerns addressed by the salvation message.\(^{583}\)

Given McLaren’s application of salvation to various problems arising from human sinfulness, he can then argue that “God’s wrath is the emotion that puts God into motion, intervening against oppressors and their injustice. God’s wrath is God’s justice in action.”\(^{584}\) In his blog, he also notes that “wrath” possibly “means God's displeasure that allows people to experience the consequences of their negative actions.”\(^{585}\) Instead of focusing on God’s wrath against human sinfulness, McLaren associates God’s wrath with a call to counter injustices within this world.

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\(^{582}\) McLaren, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 70.


\(^{584}\) McLaren, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 70.

\(^{585}\) Brian McLaren, “Q & R: Wrath and Hell” (4 March 2010) [on-line]; accessed 12 March 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/2010/03; Internet. He believes that this understanding of God’s wrath may be a better approach Romans 1.
By making temporal justice the central concern of the gospel, McLaren
discourts any discussion of hell in his gospel presentation: “The point isn’t hell: the point
is justice! . . . Jesus doesn’t invent the idea of hell. It evolves . . . over time; it’s
constructed, as all human ideas are, through the interactions of religions and cultures.”
McLaren claims Jesus’ teachings on hell were metaphorical, therefore, “many and
perhaps even all of Jesus’ hell-fire or end-of-the-universe statements refer not to
postmortem judgment but to the very historic consequences of rejecting his [K]ingdom
message of reconciliation and peacemaking.” In response to questioning concerning
his views on 2 Corinthians 5:19, McLaren argues that Paul’s goal behind his words was
reconciliation. McLaren believes that hell is simply an ongoing construction created by
humans to which Jesus added additional information to the concept even while allowing
room for continuing formation on the exact nature of hell. By removing certainty over the
doctrine of hell, McLaren points to injustice as being humanity’s primary dilemma.

586 Brian McLaren, “Exposing the Emergent Church-Pt.2-Brian McLaren
Interview,” interview by Leif Hanson, The Bleeding Purple Podcast (2006), podcast [on-
line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mr8dTvks3Gs; Internet. idem, Last Word and the
Word after that, 71. The doctrine of hell, McLaren teaches, declares “God gets his way
through coercion and violence and intimidation and domination.” In his opinion, this
doctrine presents the cross as “false advertising for God” because it declares God’s
judgment as opposed to God’s love.

587 Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren’s Inferno 3: Five Proposals for
Reexamining Our Doctrine of Hell” (11 May 2006) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011;
available from http://www.outofur.com/ archives/2006/05/brian_mclarens_2.html;
Internet.

588 McLaren “Q & R: Forgiveness and Inspiration.”
Redefinition of Evangelism

Many Christians, McLaren proclaims, focus their efforts on saving souls while neglecting the present needs of those they are trying to save.\textsuperscript{589} While few conservative evangelicals will disagree with McLaren concerning his acknowledgement of the failure of many Christians to love their neighbors as Christ commanded, they still affirm the importance of saving souls. The evangelical focus on the salvation of souls arises from their affirmation of the doctrines of \textit{sola scriptura}, \textit{sola fide}, original sin, election, and hell. Without these doctrines, evangelism can no longer be about salvation of souls because this would imply total depravity of humanity, authority and inerrancy of Scripture, existence of another world, and condemnation of those who are not saved. Since these implications are unacceptable to McLaren, he redefines conversion to fit his postmodern epistemology.\textsuperscript{590} He begins his redefinition by arguing that disciples are truth seekers as opposed to truth knowers. This section discusses the conversion to uncertainty and demonstrates how it leads to conversational and instrumental evangelism with emphasis being placed on social action.

Conversion to Uncertainty

Disciple, according to McLaren, means “learner in the way.”\textsuperscript{591} A disciple, McLaren declares, is first and foremost a learner who has embarked on a quest to know Christ and who places their confidence in Christ’s authority, who teaches others by word

\textsuperscript{589} McLaren, \textit{Everything Must Change}, 33.

\textsuperscript{590} Appendix 8 offers a biblical perspective on conversion.

\textsuperscript{591} McLaren, “Everything Old is New Again,” 25.
and deed, and who receives empowerment from the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{592} Such a quest, however, is not focused on affirming particular truths about Christ; instead, it is primarily concerned about “inviting [people] . . . into the community of disciples so they can learn to practice things that Jesus commanded—to live the way of life that Jesus lived.”\textsuperscript{593} These practices, as emphasized by McLaren, include many spiritual practices like meditation and Scripture reading along with social actions including “[p]ublic advocacy, protest, boycott, civil disobedience, and even arrest.”\textsuperscript{594} McLaren’s interpretation allows him to call discipleship a process as opposed to a one-time decision, as propounded by some evangelicals. This process to which disciples are called requires them “to learn the way so [they] can model and teach the way to others who will do the same.”\textsuperscript{595}

The “way” that disciples are called on to learn and teach is the Kingdom of God. Those who follow it are free from having to believe specific doctrines (presumably the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are included), but, as McLaren says, they practice hospitality, embrace diversity, and listen to others.\textsuperscript{596} Within the fictional conversation created to illustrate freedom from particular beliefs, McLaren demonstrates how he believes one should be led to the Lord.\textsuperscript{597} First, they need to be asked, “Do you believe in

\textsuperscript{592}McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 163-180.

\textsuperscript{593}McLaren, “Everything Old is New Again,” 25; idem, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” interview by Streett, 13.

\textsuperscript{594}McLaren, “Everything Old is New Again,” 26.

\textsuperscript{595}McLaren, \textit{Finding Our Way Again}, 36-37. Emphasis is his.

\textsuperscript{596}Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, \textit{A is for Abductive}, 313-315.

\textsuperscript{597}McLaren, \textit{Story We Find Ourselves in}, 112.
God, the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life?” The fictional convert is then praised for responding with uncertainty regarding any particular doctrines but with enough belief to proceed in a relationship with God. Second, “[D]o you want to follow Jesus?” The fictional convert replies affirmatively with confidence. With these responses, a new “believer” is then baptized.

Neoorthopraxy, as McLaren’s fictional account demonstrates, places little if any importance on doctrinal affirmation by potential converts. While he does advocate the importance of right actions, McLaren makes it clear that God’s Kingdom does not come about through human efforts; rather, their efforts merely demonstrate their acceptance of it. Given that no demands are placed on converts for particular beliefs, one wonders how conversion works in McLaren’s neoorthopraxy.

In a recent article, McLaren rejects any evangelism that seeks to convert someone to Christian faith as an “us-versus-them narrative” that aligns itself with a view that God is an enemy to the world. Instead of expounding on doctrines, postmodern evangelism, as proposed by McLaren, invites people into a relationship with God through which “the Holy Spirit can make Christ come alive and live in them.” Such evangelism does not try to connect Jesus with people but rather assumes that He has already

598 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 201.

599 McLaren, “Suicidal vs. Life-Giving Religious Narratives”; idem, “Reverend Brian McLaren NSP Speech.” In this video, he mentions that perceiving God as the enemy leads to “social damage” or social suicide.

600 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, A is for Abductive, 114.
connected with Him previously. It emphasizes open relationships where both sides learn and teach, rely on God, incarnate the message, and seeks to inform people of their connection with Jesus.

Conversational Evangelism

Since McLaren views all people as teachers and learners who are already connected with Jesus, he is able to engage in interreligious dialogue that employs a respectful attitude with others and emphasizes Christ’s greatness along with an invitation to journey with Him. To engage in evangelism, McLaren informs the evangelist to use questions as opposed to answers and to engage others in conversation. He continues, evangelistic conversations remain “short on answers, long on questions” and “short on abstractions and propositions, long on stories and parables.” Questions are preferred over answers because they cause people to think and those thoughts direct them toward Christianity. In this way, evangelism or disciple-making, according to McLaren, becomes a process of “engaging in spiritual friendship[s]” which include learning from

601 Ibid.
602 Ibid., 115-16.
603 Ibid., 161-62.
605 McLaren, More Ready than You Realize, 15.
606 Ibid., 49.
others, teaching others, and respecting others without confronting them with any truths from Scripture.\(^\text{607}\)

In place of evangelism that proclaims objective truths about Christ based on His written Revelation, McLaren’s conversational evangelism presents Jesus as a personal Jesus, “Jesus doesn’t help [people] find the answers. Jesus doesn’t show [people] what the answers are. Jesus is the answer.”\(^\text{608}\) By accepting Jesus as the answer without knowing anything particular about Him with certainty, “Good evangelists . . . [become] people who engage others in good conversation about . . . topics such as faith, values, hope, meaning, purpose, goodness, beauty, truth, life after death, life before death, and God.”\(^\text{609}\) Good evangelists also perform good deeds as they seek to serve others.\(^\text{610}\) Believing they are sent by God, their motive is one of love; it is not to force they views on others.\(^\text{611}\)

Evangelism as a conversation is a favored approach by McLaren, especially in his earlier writings, because conversations allow opportunities for missions (demonstrations of love to one’s neighbor).\(^\text{612}\) To be loving, Churches should be “open-

\(^\text{607}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^\text{608}\) Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, \textit{A is for Abductive}, 169.

\(^\text{609}\) McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 14.

\(^\text{610}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^\text{611}\) Ibid., 14.

minded, diverse, [and] accepting,” qualities which he believes postmodernists are expecting of any church that they will attend.\textsuperscript{613} Later, he argues that non-Christians sometimes need to “enter and participate in the Christian community” before they will choose to become Christians.\textsuperscript{614} McLaren bases his inclusive approach to seekers based on Christ’s friendship with sinners.\textsuperscript{615} To accomplish becoming a church that puts belonging first, McLaren states that churches should avoid using terms that are unfamiliar to seekers, divisiveness concerning various political affiliations, condemning of one’s sexual life, and failing to maintain quality.\textsuperscript{616} McLaren wants conversion to occur “in the context of authentic Christian community, not just in the context of information.”\textsuperscript{617}

McLaren laments that many Christians today fail to engage non-Christians in conversation.\textsuperscript{618} During conversations, McLaren leaves room for sharing propositions but focusing most of his message on simply sharing stories.\textsuperscript{619} This approach to evangelism offers no direct condemnation of personal sin, affirms no specific doctrine held by Orthodox Christians, prescribes no exclusive account of definitive knowledge of God, and only offers an invitation to follow Christ by loving others.

\textsuperscript{613} McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 48.
\textsuperscript{614} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{615} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{616} McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 87-88.
\textsuperscript{617} Ibid., 136. Emphasis is his.
\textsuperscript{618} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{619} Ibid., 135-36.
Given his concern for postmodern intricacies, McLaren ignores the examples of Christ and His apostles who sometimes offended people’s sensibilities and comfort zones when they confronted people with truth even as they delivered an incarnate witness. Their example of incarnational witness included a message that often offended those with whom they were conversing. Given this example, Eitel has solid biblical support for his contention that incarnational witnesses (to the restoration of God’s Kingdom) can learn and listen to those whom they are trying to convert, but they should not neglect their responsibility to communicate the gospel verbally. Hesselgrave agrees with Eitel and points out that the gospel itself should be declared alongside the invitation to be saved and the declaration’s contents need to arise from Scripture.

In response, McLaren flatly rejects the conventional evangelical position that states personal salvation without believing in Christ in accordance with His message, asking Him to indwell them, and disown all other “religious affiliation[s].” Instead of the conventional approach, McLaren invites all people into the Kingdom of God. Given his rejection of the doctrines of original sin and election and belief in a partially realized eschatology, McLaren’s invitation may prove pointless. Furthermore, his lack of certainty concerning doctrines places all humanity in a search for truth where no one can make a claim to knowledge of absolute truth. As a result, McLaren’s evangelism offers little more than conversation about biblical truth. As Driscoll observes, emerging conversation continues fifteen years later “and shows no signs of slowing down as more people are

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620 Eitel, Paradigm Wars, 69.
622 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 216.
discussing these important missional matters. Without being able to come to resolution on these matters, though, mission will simply cease.”

Instrumental Evangelism

Gradually McLaren transitions his focus from conversational evangelism to instrumental evangelism. Conversational evangelism, as propounded by McLaren, works well with his postmodern epistemology because it allows him to engage in discussion about Christianity without claiming to hold particular truth with certainty. Since evangelism ends up being little more than an ongoing discussion of truths that can never be discovered, McLaren begins to focus more effort toward a more instrumental approach to evangelism. Such an approach requires no proclamation of truth just like conversational evangelism, but it does encourage social action on part of evangelists and those evangelized. In 2004, McLaren identifies demonstrations of love and proclamation of “a vision of the [K]ingdom of God” as the “greatest outreach opportunities.” In 2007, McLaren delivers a clear call to instrumental evangelism by appealing to Christ’s example: “Jesus’ invitation to [H]is original disciples was to begin living” the good news of God’s Kingdom here and now, and His invitation has been extended to all people.

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625 McLaren, Everything Must Change, 297.
Churches along with all other communities of faith can accept Christ’s invitation by addressing “the environment,” “the economy,” “Palestine,” “nuclear disarmament,” and their own understanding of the gospel.  

Along with these primary issues that currently face churches, McLaren, in an open letter to President Barack Obama, adds four more deep issues: over consumption of world resources, global poverty, lack of peace, and lack of purpose. Instead of pointing to humanity’s sinful rebellion against God as the foremost problem in fallen creation, he chooses to call on Obama to join the Creator God and humanity as “co-creators and co-laborers who seek peace through reconciliation, justice, and generosity.”

This gospel of the Kingdom stands against or at least in lieu of the gospel that speaks about the afterlife. It promotes humanity as instruments in the restoration of God’s Kingdom to the present world through social action. Its focus is on this life and its evangelism is described by McLaren as a “dance,” a metaphor which emphasizes respect for others along non-confrontational evangelism that avoids propositional truths in favor of social service and social action.

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628 Ibid.

71:2; translated and quoted in Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: MacMillan, 1917), 92-93; Rauschenbusch. Theology for the Social Gospel, 93; Henry Warren Bowden, Church History in the Age of Science: Historiographical Patterns in the United States 1876-1918 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 171; Adolf Harnack, What is Christianity? Sixteen Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter-Term 1899-1900, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1901), 59; Albrecht Ritschl, The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1900), 13, 166-67, 336-37, 554-55. McLaren’s emphasis on social action seems to parallel Rauschenbusch’s views on the Kingdom of God. For Rauschenbusch, the Kingdom of God “means individual men and women who freely do the will of God” and “also means a growing perfection in the collective life of humanity, in [their] laws, in the customs of society, in the institutions of education, and for the administration of mercy; in [their] public opinion, [their] literary and artistic ideals, in the pervasiveness of the sense of duty, and in [their] readiness to give [their] life as a ransom for others.” Rauschenbusch, according to Henry Warner Bowden, was influenced by Adolf Harnack, Albrecht Ritschl, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. For Harnack, “the coming of the [K]ingdom” meant “vanquishing and banishing misery, need, and disease.” Albrecht Ritschl, like Rauschenbusch, rejects the doctrine of original sin and argues that sin arises naturally from individual decision: “Individual actions, which are traced back to the will as their source, are not phenomena of will which may or may not exist without changing its nature; rather, through actions, according to the direction they take, the will acquires its nature and develops into a good or an evil character. This view is directly opposed to that which is expressed in the conception of original sin.” For Ritschl, Christ did not come to save people from sin so much as he came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God through the establishment of an ethical community: “Christianity, then, is the monotheistic, completely spiritual, and ethical religion, which, based on the life of its Author as Redeemer and as Founder of the Kingdom of God, consists in the freedom of children of God, involves the impulse to conduct from the motive of love, aims at the moral organization of mankind, and grounds blessedness on the relation of sonship to God, as well as on the Kingdom of God.” Ritschl affirms “forgiveness through Christ [to be] the fundamental form in which each one receives the guarantee of his salvation”; nonetheless, the Christian’s “supreme motive” for making good moral decisions comes from following Christ’s example as opposed to heartfelt appreciation for His forgiveness. From Schleiermacher, Rauschenbusch extracts the idea that sin is a social problem where each person bears responsibility for the other’s sins: “Whether [one] view[s] this sinfulness as guilt and as conscious action, or as a principle and condition of life, in either aspect it is something wholly common, not pertaining to every individual separately or referring to him alone, but in each the work of all, and in all the work of each.” Emphasis is his.
Instead of affirming doctrines of *sola scriptura, sola fide*, original sin, election, and hell, McLaren’s Kingdom of God metanarrative unites everyone through social action. As McLaren says, it is “a new way of life, a new arrangement and set of values, a new order and a new array of priorities and commitments, a new vision of peace and how to achieve it. It [is], in short, a new way that called for new practices.” These new practices, by which individuals and communities can transform the world into a better place, include “personal practices” and “missional practices,” but they do not include particular beliefs.

McLaren, while working as a pastor, claims to have discovered that his role was not “to proclaim a system of belief, but to lead in a way of life.” The way of life, to which he is referring, is participation in God’s Kingdom simply by engaging in new practices which are various acts of love that bring forth justice for all people. By accepting the Kingdom’s arrival and participating in it, according to McLaren, people can

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632 McLaren, “Rediscovering Christian Faith.” This video contains slides that offer many practices for Christians in the process of transforming the world. McLaren mentions that the creeds need to be recited, but he does not appear to say that they should be affirmed.

633 McLaren, “An Evening with Brian McLaren 2009,” interview by Nelson. For McLaren, “a system of belief” is a systematic theology. He does not want to affirm any particular belief system as wholly without error given his epistemology. Instead, he models a way of living that hold particular beliefs while at the same time remains open to future changes in those beliefs.
bring justice to oppressed people, mercy for sinners, and the good news that God loves people.\textsuperscript{634}

As people participate in Kingdom work, McLaren acknowledges that they will encounter resistance from demonic powers who are a partial source of oppression in the world but then argues that Christ’s major resistance arises from “systemic, transpersonal evil”: “[D]ominant opposition arises out not from dirty personal demons . . . but rather from dirty systems of power and violence operating in powerful people.”\textsuperscript{635} While McLaren does not deny the presence of personal sin, his focus on social action and the restoration of God’s Kingdom lead him to focus on perceived evils in society at large.

To restore the Kingdom, Christ’s mission focused on the eradication of evil from the world and inauguration of God’s Kingdom through the work of His Spirit to make this world free of violence, oppression, and every other kind of evil.\textsuperscript{636} McLaren acknowledges evil within governments, religious systems, and power brokers within these structures, but he diminishes the pervasiveness of personal sin and its effect on this world.\textsuperscript{637} Even so, he does acknowledge it briefly, but then he argues that both personal sin and corporate sins of government and religion “could be forgiven and reconciled to God.”\textsuperscript{638} McLaren makes his overarching focus corporate sin clear when he tells Christians to direct more of their attention on major “societal and systemic injustices”

\textsuperscript{634}McLaren, \textit{Finding Faith}, 239.
\textsuperscript{635}McLaren, \textit{Secret Message of Jesus}, 64.
\textsuperscript{636}Ibid., 65-66.
\textsuperscript{637}Ibid., 68-71.
\textsuperscript{638}Ibid., 71.
and less on “personal and sexual matters” because their current focus has caused Christians to be viewed as “tense, judgmental, imbalanced, reactionary, negative, and hypocritical.”

Not only have Christians been distracted by their focus on “moral issues,” they have neglected the present world by overemphasizing a world to come. In response, McLaren proffers a gospel of the Kingdom of God that seeks to deal directly with the world’s problems and calls all people to join in this endeavor. The next section demonstrates the contours of McLaren’s gospel.

The Kingdom of God Invitation

Brian D. McLaren’s Gospel in the Kingdom

Since McLaren has accepted that each individual and community is caught up in an ongoing search for real though elusive truth, he is forced to develop a postmodern context for Christ and His church. His context, as previously demonstrated, is the Kingdom of God metanarrative which offers unity to all with no fear of condemnation. To offer unity without condemnation, McLaren seeks to retell the gospel while avoiding exclusive truth claims which by default contradict his postmodern worldview and develops his understanding of God’s Kingdom as a postmodern context which emphasizes action as opposed to exclusive truth claims.

639 McLaren, Everything Must Change, 33.
640 Ibid.
641 Todd L. Miles, “A Kingdom without a King? Evaluating the Kingdom Ethic(s) of the Emerging Church,” Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 12, no. 1 (2008): 88. Miles observes that McLaren’s emphasis of Kingdom of God instead of the
Todd L. Miles observes that McLaren’s emphasis on the Kingdom of God instead of the gospel of Christ will only lead to “a non-redemptive and powerless social work.” The truth of Miles’ observation can be seen clearly in McLaren’s articulation of Christianity’s primary purpose: “The main point is God’s saving love for creation, God’s Faithfulness to all of creation, [and] God’s ongoing mission of healing a world torn by human injustice.” He arrives at his conclusion over time by beginning with what he believes is Christ’s core message: ‘the Kingdom of God has come.’

**Gospel of Reconciliation according to Paul and Jesus**

The immediate presence of God’s Kingdom, for McLaren, becomes the gospel’s essence. “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” according to McLaren, is the gospel rather than various interpretations of Paul which state that Paul taught that only certain people are saved. McLaren defines his gospel of the Kingdom as “a message of reconciliation” and argues that Paul was simply trying to bring reconciliation to people so that they might embrace unity in the Kingdom. His definition of the gospel arises from Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels first and foremost. Gary Steven Shogren disagrees

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642 Ibid., 98.


647 Ibid.
because he believes Paul established some new perspectives on the Kingdom of God: “It was he who, first, had to teach them about the future Kingdom of God; second, that it was possible not to inherit the Kingdom; and third, that sinners in certain categories would be among those who would not inherit it.” McLaren, however, sees reconciliation as a consistent theme in Paul that somehow overcomes any of view of Paul’s writings that may express exclusivity and lead to disunity:

As in his letter to the Romans, Paul (in Acts 28:23, 30-31) does not preach a different gospel; he is still carrying the same gospel he received from Jesus Christ in a vision, the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Whether in person or by letter, he calls people everywhere to be reconciled in the Kingdom of God—reconciled to God by grace through faith, reconciled with themselves, reconciled with others whatever their class, ethnic, cultural, or religious background, and reconciled with all creation... Paul is a ‘Jesus and the Kingdom of God’ guy from first to last. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ and of his servant/apostle Paul: the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Chris Rosebrough, in his criticism of McLaren on his understanding of Paul in relation to Jesus, accuses McLaren of saying that Paul and Jesus had a separate gospel, a charge which McLaren vehemently denies because he believes that both had the same gospel—the Kingdom of God here and now.


Like McLaren, Newbigin considers God’s Kingdom to be the essential gospel of Jesus and states that Christ’s declaration means “the kingship of God was no longer something in the distant future, or something in heaven, or a kind of theological topic for discussion, but something confronting [people] here and now.”  

McLaren expounds upon Newbigin’s point: “The [K]ingdom of God” means “God's reconciling community, God's new way of living, God's dream for creation, God's mission in the world, God's healing of all creation, God's will being done on earth as in heaven, Creation 2.0” and “[a]t hand” means “within reach, available to everyone, truly here and at work, present, inviting [their] participation, calling [them] to rethink everything and reorient [their] lives.”

Since McLaren views God’s Kingdom to be present reality, he is able to extend reconciliation between God and humanity to all of creation. As he puts it, “Jesus was about . . . a global, public movement or revolution to bring holistic reconciliation, a reconnection with God, with others, with [each other], with [the] environment.” In 2006, McLaren calls the Kingdom of God a “reconciling movement” brought forth by Christ’s life and work whereby all creation is in a process of being restored to full relationship with God. He then rejects traditional views which advocate eventual

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destruction of earth in favor of a view that Christ came to save and restore creation.\textsuperscript{655}

God’s ultimate goal, in McLaren’s view, is to save the whole world and all its contents and not just individual souls.\textsuperscript{656}

\textit{Gospel of a Loving God}

To encourage reconciliation between God and His creation, McLaren expands his definition of mission to include all good works of Christ’s followers on earth since they are tasked with spreading this good news through word and deed.\textsuperscript{657} To support his expansion, McLaren rewrites his original mission statement from \textit{Reinventing Your Church}: “To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world.”\textsuperscript{658} Redrafting the Great Commission allows him to develop a gospel for the whole world by combining evangelism and social action as a unified statement of love.\textsuperscript{659} One wonders what love means to McLaren and how can such love bring unity. Since he prefers to see Christ as the ultimate albeit personal revelation of God while viewing Scripture as non-authoritative, his view of love has no grounds upon which to stand thereby any number of other possible definitions of love may arise according to individual preference.

\textsuperscript{655}McLaren, \textit{Everything Must Change}, 82.

\textsuperscript{656}McLaren, \textit{New Kind of Christian}, 129.

\textsuperscript{657}Sweet et al., \textit{Church in Emerging Culture}, 204.

\textsuperscript{658}McLaren, \textit{Generous Orthodoxy}, 106-107.

\textsuperscript{659}Ibid., 107-108.
McLaren, like many emergents according to McKnight, has a particular conception of God’s love that deviates from Scripture and leads to the OT passages, which sometimes portray God as violent, being “interpreted as the way ancients talked about God, with later biblical revelation seen as clearly presenting a God who is altogether gracious and loving.”\(^660\) An example can be found in McLaren’s discussion of Noah’s flood (perhaps God’s most violent act in the OT) which he believes should be compared with other stories in Scripture and viewed as “theological progress . . . instead of simply condemning it for not having progressed more.”\(^661\) Approaching Scripture in this way, he adds, “helps [people] see the biblical library as the record of a series of trade-ups, people courageously letting go of their state-of-the-art understanding of God when an even better understanding begins to emerge.”\(^662\) By arguing that Scripture (especially the OT) contains a flawed but emerging understanding of God’s person, McLaren makes a mistake similar to that of Marcion. Marcion, who considered the God of the OT to be a vile and violent creator, provides a new hermeneutic: “[O]ne should read the gospel, epistles, and the OT only in the perspective of how new is the message of the redeeming God of love, and how frightful and deplorable at the same time is the evil-righteous God of the world and of law.”\(^663\)

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\(^661\) McLaren, *New Kind of Christianity*, 110.

\(^662\) Ibid., 111.

Soteriology

According to Trevor P. Craigen, McLaren’s gospel, which avoids questions about the afterlife and focuses on present life, alters the focus of soteriology:

The description of the ‘here and now’ focus continues: Salvation is as much concerned with life before death as with life after death, and is the rescue of one from the fruitless ways of life today, of rescue from the cycle of violence [seen for example in the Pharisees versus Romans at the time of the Gospels], and of deliverance from a life of hatred and fear. It means that the convert becomes (1) a member of a new kind of people delivered from the guilt that drains life of its joys, (2) a new kind of people who live out love and justice in the world and who will create a good and beautiful world in accord with the concept of sharing in God’s saving love for all creation, and (3) a participant in the adventure of the Kingdom of God, which Christ is establishing in the world on the earth within history—and it begins right now without waiting for the Second Coming, or some future apocalyptic events to occur. This kind of person would not have been told to give up this life and focus on salvation from hell after this life, but rather to make sure his theology does not aid and abet him in avoiding being involved in God’s will being done on earth.

Not surprisingly, with the present life dominating, the question about one’s future shifts from inquiring after one's eternal destiny to asking about one's future condition and status while still alive on earth. The doctrine of the afterlife has changed to that of the present life. Thus, these two questions, ‘If you were to live for another fifty years, what kind of person would you like to become and how will you become that kind of person?’ and ‘If Jesus doesn't return for ten thousand or ten million years, what kind of world do we want to create?’ replace traditional evangelicalism's two well-known questions, ‘If you die tonight, do you know for certain that you will be with God in heaven?’ and ‘If Jesus returned today, would you be ready to meet God?’

Craigen criticizes McLaren for limiting soteriological concerns to present life and downplaying any concerns about Christ’s Second Coming and a future judgment.

Resurrection of Christ

The reality of human condition, McLaren adds, necessitates their need for

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The cross of Christ serves to bring humanity salvation which establishes the Kingdom of God built on God’s forgiveness:

[I]n Christ on the cross [one] see[s] God’s ultimate way of dealing with suffering and evil: to bear it with endurance, to suffer it with tears and agony, to take it into God’s own heart, and to heal it utterly, not by avenging it, but by forgiving it. The kingdom or sovereignty of God that Jesus proclaims, then, doesn’t come with the power of unilateral control but with a radically different kind of power: the gentle power (Paul dares call it ‘weakness’) of love.

McLaren argues that Christ’s death satisfied God’s condemnation of human sinfulness to bring forth a universal salvation which frees humanity from final condemnation because of God’s grace through Christ:

God never expresses justice at the expense of kindness, or vice versa, but every expression of justice is kind and every expression of kindness is just. God’s integrated judgment, then, could never be merely retributive – seeking to punish wrongdoers for their wrongs and in this way balance some sort of karmic cosmic equation. No, God’s judgment would have to be far higher and better than that: it would have to be restorative. It would aim far higher than merely convicting people of wrong (which is easy); its goal would be universal repentance, universal restoration, universal reconciliation, universal purification, universal “putting wrong things right,” which is a God-sized task. In this sense, achieving judgment means achieving a right outcome, which in turn means reconciling, not merely punishing; treating and healing, not merely diagnosing; transforming, not merely exposing; redeeming (or giving value), not merely evaluating.

So when [one] say[s], with the writer of Hebrews, that ‘it is appointed to human beings to die once, and after this, the judgment,’ [one is] not saying, ‘and after this, the condemnation.’ [One is] saying, with John, that to ‘see God,’ to be in God’s unspeakable light, will purge [one] of all darkness.
In 2004, McLaren offers a “new equation of resurrection” that solves the dilemma of death and sin, offers “[g]enerosity, courage, gratitude, and love,” and extends salvation from death to all people.\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Generous Orthodoxy}, 53-54.} The dilemma of death and sin, whatever it may be in McLaren’s opinion, is certainly not a “guilt problem that kept [people] out of heaven.”\footnote{Ibid., 86.} Salvation, therefore, need not be applied to any final condemnation that leads a permanent stain of human nature (the doctrine of original sin); rather, it simply allows everyone to see their “true value, wisdom, and identity” in the next life.\footnote{Ibid., 54.}

For an understanding of McLaren’s views on the relationship between heaven and Christ’s resurrection, he himself appeals to N. T. Wright’s \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}.\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Secret Message of Jesus}, 234.} Throughout most of this work, Wright affirms the traditional view that “Resurrection means bodily life \textit{after} ‘life after death,’ or . . . bodily life after the state of ‘death.’”\footnote{N. T. Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 108-109.} Despite this affirmation, however, Wright sets forth an argument from Revelation 20 that the resurrection will involve an eschatological renewal of present creation.\footnote{Ibid., 473-74.} In \textit{Surprised by Hope}, Wright declares his view more explicitly: He believes heaven and earth will be united under Christ’s rule and the world itself will be transformed to its original state of goodness; in fact, it has been in this process of
transforming since Christ’s resurrection and Christians should join Christ in the transformation process. Wright admits his uncertainty regarding biblical teaching on hell and prefers to focus on Christ’s message of the inauguration of God’s Kingdom in the present life and the corresponding responsibility of all people to join Him by helping complete what He has inaugurated.

Along with concurring with Wright’s subjective approach to Scripture, McLaren also supports his development of God’s Kingdom as the gospel. When Christ says “The [K]ingdom of God has come near to you,” in Luke 10:9, Wright believes God was now unveiling [H]is age-old plan, bringing [H]is sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world . . . [and] bringing justice and mercy to Israel and the world.” Following Wright, McLaren sees Christ’s resurrection essentially as a means through which God brings forth His plan to restore the world to its former glory before humanity’s fall.

While McLaren admits an ominous presence of sin in all creation, his belief in ultimate reconciliation for all creation through Christ’s death presents sin more as an external reality than an internal reality. He affirms the inclusion of conviction of sins as a necessary part of salvation, but then he excludes condemnation from conviction:

Forgiveness without conviction is not forgiveness: it is irresponsible toleration. It doesn't lead to reconciliation and peace; it leads to chaos... Conversely, judgment

\[\text{N. T. Wright, } \textit{Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church} \text{ (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 19, 99-100, 259, 276; McLaren, } \textit{New Kind of Christianity}, \text{ 284. McLaren recommends this book by Wright.} \]

\[\text{Wright, } \textit{Surprised by Hope}, \text{ 175-77.} \]

\[\text{McLaren, } \textit{Everything Must Change}, \text{ 122-25.} \]

\[\text{N. T. Wright, } \textit{The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus was and is} \text{ (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 37; McLaren, } \textit{Secret Message of Jesus}, \text{ 183-85.} \]
without mercy is not salvation, but condemnation. It doesn’t lead to reconciliation and peace: it leads to alienation. The Good News of salvation is that God sent Jesus not to condemn but to save; to save by bringing justice with mercy, true judgment with true forgiveness.\(^{678}\)

Christ’s cross, McLaren argues, does remove the guilt of sin.\(^{679}\) Even so, the lack of condemnation wrought by inward conviction does not affect humanity inwardly like condemnation for their sinfulness would.

Externally, the purpose of Christ’s death, McLaren writes, is to overcome social injustices: “Jesus will use the cross to expose the cruelty and injustice of those in power and instill hope and confidence in the oppressed.”\(^{680}\) McLaren rejects more traditional views that associate Christ’s cross with God’s wrath due to human sinfulness and their corresponding need for redemption from hell:

This is, one of the huge problems is the traditional understanding of hell. Because if the cross is in line with Jesus’ teaching then—I won’t say, the only, and I certainly won’t say even the primary—but a primary meaning of the cross is that the kingdom of God doesn’t come like the kingdoms of the this [sic] world, by inflicting violence and coercing people. But that the kingdom of God comes through suffering and willing, voluntary sacrifice. But in an ironic way, the doctrine of hell basically says, no, that that’s not really true. That in the end, 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.\(^{681}\)

Christ’s cross, His suffering and His death, inaugurates the Kingdom of God

\(^{678}\) McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 95.


and sets forth an example, in McLaren’s opinion, for all humanity to follow. The resurrection demonstrates “that no human system can be trusted, that all [religious systems] are potentially demonic and idolatrous.” Resurrection then is extended to all humanity and becomes “an embodied state within this creation in a new era or age when the present wrongs would be made right.”

External reconciliation, wrought by Christ’s sacrifice, is consummated by Christ’s Second Coming, an event which McLaren believes somehow has already occurred.

The Second Coming

At first, McLaren prefers to present the Second Coming as a subject best left unresolved. In *Everything Must Change*, he presents it as a doctrine that may need rethinking, a task which he begins in earnest by arguing against the position that Jesus’ first coming was in peace and His Second Coming will be in violence and result in final condemnation to hell of those who have not believed in Him: “If we believe that Jesus came in peace the first time, but that wasn’t his ‘real’ and decisive coming—it was just a kind of warm-up for the real thing—then we leave the door open to envisioning a second coming that will be characterized by violence, killing, domination, and eternal torture.”

Instead of a violent view of Christ’s Second Coming which is associated with the orthodox doctrine of hell, McLaren believes the Second Coming applies to the

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682 McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 70.

683 Ibid., 184.


ongoing and final removal of injustice in the world which will bring about complete reconciliation between God and humanity:

In light of the literary conventions of both literature of the oppressed in general and Jewish apocalyptic in particular, and assuming that Jesus’ coming as told in the Gospels is not a fake-me-out coming, but actually was the climatic revelation of God as the New Testament seems to affirm (Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-4), Jesus’ ‘striking down the nations’ with a sword “coming out of his mouth” has a very different meaning. Jesus’ word—the unarmed truth of the gospel of the kingdom—is the force that overcomes the ‘kingdom of this world,’ the dominant system, the suicide machine. It conquers not with physical weapons but with a message of justice (Revelation 19:11), and the blood on Jesus’ robe is not the blood of his enemies, but his own blood (12:11, cf. 5:6).

Read in this way, we don’t have a violent ‘Second Coming’ Jesus who finishes what the gentle “First Coming” Jesus failed to do, but we have a poetic description of the way the gentle First Coming Jesus powerfully overcomes through his nonviolent ‘weakness’ (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25), a prince of peace whose sword of reconciliation is truly mightier than Caesar’s sword.686

McLaren’s views on the close association of the Second Coming and reconciliation of creation are heavily influenced by N. T. Wright who affirms Christ’s Second Coming and corresponding recreation of this world but also believes that such recreation will occur “in dynamic and perhaps material continuity with this present creation.”687

In A New Kind of Christianity, McLaren takes another leap forward and appropriates Christ’s Second Coming to His Spirit’s presence in communities of people:

686 Ibid., 145.
687 Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions: The Leading Liberal and Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 197-98; Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 117; McLaren, “Brian’s Recommendations”; McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 46. McLaren’s lists recommends several works by N. T. Wright including The Challenge of Jesus. McLaren also credits N. T Wright among others with his “frontwards” reading of Scripture, that is to say, his Kingdom of God hermeneutic which he believes unfolds through Scripture and will continue to unfold until creation (that is, the Kingdom of God) is restored. He also credits N. T. Wright with influencing his views on the relationship between Christ’s resurrection and heaven.
“Christ [is now] present, embodied in a community of people who truly possess and express [H]is Spirit, continuing [H]is work.” McLaren clarifies his position on the Second Coming:

When Jesus speaks of coming back or again, sometimes he’s referring to the resurrection ... sometimes he may be referring to his coming to be with us via the Holy Spirit at Pentecost ... and sometimes he may be referring to the coming of a new era and ‘the end of the (current) age’ centered in holy city, temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. He may also be referring to some ultimate judgment day . . . but the more I read the New Testament, the fewer of those references I think there are. More and more, it seems, Jesus was referring to things that were very close at hand, and so in that way, it turns out both Jesus and Paul were right: the cataclysm they predicted would happen “before this generation passes.”

While McLaren is still forming his position on a bodily return of Christ, he does associate Christ’s Second Coming with human efforts to restore justice to this world and reconciliation between God and humanity. The Second Coming is renamed a “participatory eschatology” by McLaren and was inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection. Christ’s resurrection, “which anticipates the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God,” leads to what McLaren calls a “participatory eschatology” whereby Christians are tasked with “participat[ing] in the ongoing work of God, and anticipat[ing] its ultimate

688 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 198. McLaren identifies the present era as “the age of love rather than circumcision or other in group markers as the prime identification of the people of God.” If this is so, communities of people who embody the Holy Spirit, it seems, must include all people.


690 McLaren, New Kind of Christianity, 199-201.
success.” His eschatology clearly emphasizes human participation in the full restoration of God’s Kingdom in the present world but neglects the issue of eternal life. The next section will offer an in-depth discussion on McLaren’s “participatory eschatology.”

**Participatory Eschatology**

McLaren’s eschatological views formed by the time of his publication of *A New Kind of Christianity*. After deconstructing doctrines of original sin and *sola scriptura*, McLaren could posit humanity as free from condemnation and essentially unaccountable to Scripture because of their inherent postmodern epistemology not to mention the lack of final condemnation based on McLaren’s view of God as Love. Such an understanding of God and His Word allows eternal life to become a given and eschatology to no longer need to be considered in detail. Instead, eschatology becomes focused on human activity here and now. This section demonstrates how McLaren connects eternal life with social action by presenting Christ’s role to a Liberating King who helps extinguish injustice for all humanity and calling upon churches to assist Christ. In 2010, he states that Christ’s primary hermeneutic is liberation from slavery and “economic/social/cultural oppression” to a life of peace with God. By applying his

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691 Ibid., 169, 199-201.

692 This does not mean that McLaren teaches that humans are perfect and without sin; rather, they are not encumbered by the original sin of Adam. Due to Christ’s forgiveness, they are also beyond final condemnation in McLaren’s thinking.

693 McLaren, *360 Church*. 
hermeneutic to Scripture, McLaren opens up much room for social action within his Kingdom of God theology but may leave little room for eternal life.

**Eternal Life and Social Action**

Christian eschatologies typically address the world’s end, final judgment, heaven, hell, and the afterlife. Since it has already been established that McLaren denies an end to this present world and final condemnation of persons to hell, a consideration of McLaren’s views on eternal life is timely. McLaren’s “participatory eschatology” shares a marked degree of similarity with his partially realized eschatology in which God’s Kingdom is already present and humans are insisting in its final consummation through social action.\(^{694}\) Given that McLaren’s Kingdom of God metanarrative is essentially concerned with temporal matters, how does eternal life fit into McLaren’s “participatory eschatology”? McLaren considers the Kingdom of God (Mark’s Gospel), the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew’s Gospel), and eternal life (John’s Gospel) as all referring to living a “life full of prosperity, security, equity, meaning, and shalom,” all of which will occur as people strive for justice.\(^{695}\) For McLaren, eternal life is knowing God and knowing Jesus in an “interactive relationship,” but such knowing is subjective rather than objective.\(^{696}\)

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\(^{694}\) McLaren, “Jesus & the Kingdom”; idem, “Justice, Power, & the Kingdom”; Miles, “A Kingdom without a King?,” 88.

\(^{695}\) McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 177; idem, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 77.

He then connects eternal life to God’s Kingdom by saying that the Kingdom is also “a life lived in a network of active relationships” with both God and people. Since the “gospel of the Kingdom must produce disciples who learn a radical new way of life and participate in the transformation of the world,” eternal life and social action are somehow intertwined.

According to McLaren, “eternal life” in John’s Gospel is a phrase that refers to one’s being caught in a current, ongoing, and interactive relationship to God that continues into the future. John’s use of eternal life, McLaren argues, was not a reference to life that occurs after one’s death; rather, it refers to living a full life by having “an interactive relationship with the only true God and with Jesus Christ.” By equating eternal life with current life and associating God’s Kingdom solely with social action, McLaren largely fails to address the issue of eternal life.

Given this general direction in McLaren’s writings, Greg Gilbert submits a criticism of McLaren’s eschatology:

McLaren’s gospel is so socially and politically oriented, so focused on the present, and so unwilling to address the reality of eternity, that it has no obvious place for concepts like substitution, justification, atonement, sacrifice, or propitiation. Yet those are the concepts and themes that come together in the Bible’s narrative to give meaning to the cross. The fact is that the kind of Kingdom McLaren wants Jesus to

www.brianmclaren.net/archives/politicsinchurch.ppt; Internet. McLaren suggests that eternal life is clearly defined as knowing God and knowing Jesus based on John 17:3.


698 McLaren, “Scared to Talk Politics in Church,” 33; idem, “Q & R: What is the Gospel?” Emphasis is his.

699 McLaren, Last Word and the Word after that, 151.

have preached—one where each person simply decides to live a life of compassion and love in an effort to redeem the world in the here-and-now and bring about "God’s dream" for it—doesn't have any real use for a cross. The fact is, McLaren’s two favored theories of the atonement, the only ones not riddled with objections by his characters, are simply not integral to his story. At best, they both make the cross a superfluous illustration of the kind of life the [K]ingdom would call [Christians] to live.\footnote{Greg Gilbert, “Brian McLaren and the Gospel of Here & Now,” 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (July-August 2007); accessed 12 March 2011; available from http://new.9marks.org/ejournal/brian-mclaren-and-gospel-here-now; Internet; Brian McLaren, “Q & R: The Propitiation Question” (November 19, 2010) [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-the-propitiation-question.html#more; Internet. Gilbert, in making his criticism, observes that throughout McLaren’s discussion McLaren will offer several statements to undermine the work of his critics: “McLaren occasionally drops into his text a sentence or two that will cut the feet out from under his critics. I’m not denying this or that, he says, and then he spends an entire book talking about how the thing he’s supposedly not denying is in fact a horrible and ungodly misunderstanding of the gospel. Yet right there, at the bottom of page 142 or whatever, is that one sentence, plain as day, denying that he’s denying it.” In his blog, McLaren admits that his gospel of the Kingdom does not deal with propitiation because it is a narrative approach to theology and not a linear approach to theology.}

If Gilbert’s assessment is correct, McLaren’s gospel is little more than good news for present life with little to say about the life to come. While his gospel assumes that the life to come will somehow include everyone and present creation as well, he has little to say about Christ’s role in future and focuses instead on His past and present work in establishing God’s Kingdom throughout creation by ridding the world of injustice.

\textit{Christ and Social Action}

When Christ says, “My [K]ingdom is not of this world,” McLaren interprets Him as saying that His Kingdom is still in this world but it is not like this world (John 18:36).\footnote{McLaren, \textit{Everything Must Change}, 115.} God’s Kingdom is quite different than worldly kingdoms, according to McLaren, because in it, “[o]rder becomes opportunity, stability melts into movement and...
change, status quo government gives way to a revolution of community and
neighborliness, policy bows to love, domination descends to service and sacrifice, control
morphs into influence and inspiration, and vengeance and threats are transformed into
forgiveness and blessing." McLaren’s develops his list of positive changes in the world
from his view of Christ’s work during his earthly life:

Jesus, the Liberating King, came to free humanity from injustice and to display the
justice of God, in word and deed, in life, death, and resurrection. The justice which
God desires . . . is a compassionate justice, rich in mercy and abounding in love.
. . . On His cross, Jesus drew the injustice of humanity into the light, and there
the heartless injustice of human empire met the reconciling justice of the
Kingdom of God. The resurrection of Jesus proclaims that the true justice of God
. . . is stronger than the violent injustice of humanity, armed with weapons,
conceit, deceit, and lies.

Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection set humanity and creation on a course that
will lead to an abolishment of all injustice. Christ, as perceived by McLaren, rids the
world of injustice caused by humanity so that humanity and creation can be fully
reconciled to God.

Jesus, as Liberating King, will free the world from oppression by His “grace
and acceptance rather than by fear and threats of exclusion.” When Jesus does employs
exclusive language such as “being cast into ‘outer darkness’ . . . where there is ‘weeping
and gnashing of teeth,’” He is applying these harsh words, in McLaren’s view, to those
who were being exclusive like the Pharisees so as to deconstruct “the dominant system of

703 Ibid., 125.
704 Brian McLaren, “Justice Creed.”
705 McLaren, Everything Must Change, 125.
exclusion.” Jesus’ good news undermines Pharisaical exclusiveness and “involves God’s bringing down those in power (Luke 1:52-53) so that the poor can be legitimized (Luke 4:18), and so that the religious collaboration with the empire can be exposed as hypocrisy.” Whereas Pharisees downplayed a relationship with God in favor of following a set of rules, McLaren abolishes rules in favor of an open relationship with God. Towns and Stetzer agree with McLaren that Christianity is not about keeping rules, but “it does have principles by which [Christians] live for God.” Since all humanity has been included underneath the banner of Christ as Liberating King, one wonders about the Church’s role in McLaren’s participatory eschatology.

The Church and Social Action

McLaren presents the Church and God’s Kingdom as two distinct, though connected, realities with the Church serving as a “catalyst” for the Kingdom of God because God’s work extends beyond churches to include “the environment,” “people of other religions,” and “the poor and oppressed.” Churches, therefore, become subservient to God’s Kingdom with one result being a diminished importance. Another result is a redefinition of the Church’s mission by broadening it beyond the salvation of souls to include working toward total reconciliation between God and present creation.

706 Ibid., 126-27.
707 Ibid., 124.
709 McLaren, New Kind of Christian, 83-84.
The mission of the Church, as McLaren originally conceived it, is “more Christians and better Christians,” but later he adds two more categories to his conception of mission: “[a]uthentic missional community” and “[f]or the good of the world.” The first category is self-explanatory and the second seeks to combine evangelism and discipleship. The third category of mission is synonymous, in McLaren’s view, with God’s Kingdom. It indicates that the task in mission is to do good works so that the Kingdom of God will pervade all creation.

The Church’s goal in mission is not to expand itself but to expand God’s Kingdom because evangelism is subjugated to a “larger mission of the [K]ingdom.” McLaren adds that all Christians are called to engage in his postmodern mission: “[M]ission is simply seeking, receiving, and manifesting the [K]ingdom of God, the reign of God, the reality of God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven.” McLaren wants to invite people to join the Church in its task of expanding the Kingdom not necessarily to call upon them to join the Church as a distinct community (completely separated from the world). To this end, McLaren offers four central tasks (or primary purposes) of church, which he believes are being expounded upon in the

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710 McLaren, Reinventing Your Church, 28; idem, Church on the Other Side, 28.

711 McLaren, Reinventing Your Church, 29.

712 McLaren, Church on the Other Side, 34-36.

713 McLaren, New Kind of Christian, 156.

714 Ibid.

715 Ibid., 156-57.
“emerging/missional conversation:” “1. Provide a civil religion for the state, 2. Preserve and promote certain social values, 3. Provide a living for religious professionals, [and] 4. Promote the satisfaction of its members.” 716 “The [E]merging [C]hurch,” McLaren argues, “is raising these deeper questions and proposing that the [C]hurch exists to be a catalyst for the [K]ingdom of God as a transforming force in the world.” 717 To transform the world, churches should avoid becoming “self-centered” in their mission, methods, and theology so as to bless creation by helping inaugurate God’s Kingdom. 718

McLaren further articulates the Church’s mission by combining Christ’s various commissioning statements from the Gospels and Acts:

You can’t keep the secret of the [K]ingdom to yourself. I am now sending you, as the Father has sent me, to communicate the good news of the [K]ingdom of God. Those who receive your message, you should form into learning communities of practicing disciples so they learn to live according to my secret message, just as you are learning. You should not do this in your own power, but you must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. And you shouldn’t stop at the borders of your own culture, language, or religion, but you must cross every border and boundary to share with all people everywhere the secret you’ve learned from me—the way, the truth, the life you’ve experienced walking with me. 719


717 Ibid., 2.

718 Brian McLaren, “Bless This House? Why Efforts to Renew the Church are often Misguided” (29 June 2004), 1 [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2011; available from http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/currenttrendscolumns/leadershipweekly/cln40629.html; Internet.

For McLaren, “The ‘[G]reat [C]ommission’ is the call to make disciples, teaching people the words and ways of Jesus so they will actually live as Jesus lived.”  

Those who accept McLaren’s commission by trusting and believing it become part of God’s Kingdom and then can “begin living in a new and better way now.”  

They are also supposed to “[i]nvite people of all nations, races, classes, and religions to participate in this network [that is, the Kingdom of God] of dynamic, interactive relationships with God and all God’s creation.”  

Noting an emerging emphasis on God’s Kingdom, Todd L. Miles says, “the church in most of its evangelical expressions has not shared the Kingdom focus that seems to permeate the Gospels and New Testament.”  

After making his admission, Miles expresses concern that the Emerging Church may have isolated a biblical theme and used it as a means to further their agenda without being faithful to context and with the end result being “theologically empty social action.”  

Disregarding Miles’ concern, McLaren believes a church’s mission should be focused more on major “societal and systemic injustices” and less on “personal and sexual matters” because their current focus has caused Christians to be viewed as “tense, judgmental, imbalanced, reactionary, negative, and hypocritical.”  

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721 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 83.  

722 Ibid., 74.  

723 Miles, “A Kingdom without a King?,” 88.  

724 Ibid., 88.  

725 McLaren, Everything Must Change, 33.
Christians distracted by their focus on “moral issues,” they were neglecting the present world by overemphasizing a world to come.\textsuperscript{726} Such a mentality, McLaren proclaims, has caused many Christians to focus their efforts on saving souls while neglecting present needs of those they are trying to save.\textsuperscript{727}

\textbf{Chapter Summary}

McLaren rejects the Four Spiritual Laws as a modernist construction of Old Christianity that is no longer valid in the postmodern world. In its place, McLaren proposes a Kingdom of God theology which offers a biblical foundation for articulating McLaren’s Christianity without having to confirm most if not all of doctrines associated historically with Christian orthodoxy. To arrive at his theology, McLaren deconstructs previously held theologies and then constructs his non-foundational theology which allows for an ongoing search for truth. Despite his postmodern epistemology and his non-foundational theology, McLaren maintains a view of God as a loving and non-condemning Being as foundational truths for his non-foundational Kingdom of God theology.

Since objective truth claims are relegated to an ongoing search process, McLaren develops an incarnational theology to support his view of God’s Kingdom. Incarnational theology, in McLaren’s opinion, focuses less on truth claims and more on actions and human relationships. The actions of humans as incarnational witnesses even become the center of McLaren’s eschatological views. God’s Kingdom, for McLaren, is

\textsuperscript{726} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{727} Ibid.
this present world and its restoration to its former glory before humanity’s fall will be established through the actions of God and humanity. Such a partially realized eschatology offers another foundational truth claim within McLaren’s non-foundational Kingdom of God theology.

McLaren believes that his theology allows any given culture to offer new truths and new expressions of Christianity because it considers objective truths to be incomprehensible. Given his postmodern epistemological basis for his theology, McLaren has succeeded in offering a biblical theology that allows for any number of competing truth claims. Even so, McLaren’s theology maintains several foundational claims that may prevent him from accomplishing his goal. His view of God as a loving Being who is non-condemning may be rejected by some cultures that choose a different view of God. Any such view would immediately place McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology in peril. Second, McLaren’s eschatological views on the Kingdom of God may be rejected by some who offer competing views. Third, others may not support McLaren’s epistemological stance or his call to social action.

Despite these difficulties, McLaren continues to build his theology based on these foundational truth claims. He reconstructs the doctrine of salvation and extends salvation to all humanity because he does not view sin as a relational problem between God and humanity. Instead, sin is a temporal issue that affects full restoration of God’s Kingdom in the present world. To overcome its ill effects, McLaren calls on people to engage in removal of injustice through social action. In this way, justice in the present world becomes the priority for McLaren’s evangelistic efforts instead of saving souls from hell. To support his priority, McLaren redirects evangelism to incorporate
conversion of people to his postmodern epistemology, promotion of an ongoing discussion about truth, and engagement in social action.

After identifying God’s Kingdom as the central message of Jesus, McLaren then applies his interpretation of Christ’s message to the whole Bible. Based on his understanding of epistemology, his view of God and his desire for temporal justice, McLaren posits reconciliation as the central tenet in his Kingdom of God theology and extends it to all humanity and creation as a whole given his view of the Kingdom of God as a present reality. To accomplish reconciliation, McLaren believes that followers of Christ should love others by engaging in social action and this engagement becomes the essence of evangelism. Given McLaren’s epistemological views, it remains unclear exactly how one is to know which type of social action should be construed as a loving act since one can never be certain that one’s actions is truly loving.

God’s Kingdom as a present reality in McLaren’s thinking has many soteriological implications. Since McLaren applies his doctrine of salvation to removal of temporal injustice through social actions, he neglects to develop a theology of the afterlife that offers a response to views of many conservative evangelicals based on their own interpretations of Scripture. The exact purpose of Christ’s death, His resurrection, and His Second Coming within McLaren’s eschatology still remains elusive even though he does believe they are connected with the restoration of God’s Kingdom in this world.

Since McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology denies the doctrine of original sin and affirms God as a loving and non-condemning Being, eternal life becomes a given for all people. McLaren develops a participatory eschatology which invites all people to join God by performing social action and avoiding acts that promote injustice. As humans
engage in this endeavor, McLaren believes that God’s Kingdom in its fullness will be restored within present creation. Within McLaren’s eschatology, Christ becomes a Liberating King who informs humanity about their role in the production of injustice and their call to engage in social action. Christ, according to McLaren, liberates all humanity with an inclusive message of acceptance except perhaps those who prefer to remain exclusive in their views. With Christ as a Liberating King, the Church’s role, in McLaren’s theology, is no longer to gather God’s people as a separate community who enjoys a special relationship with God and a special future in eternity; rather, the Church becomes a messenger to the world that is tasked with informing them of their reconciliation and their responsibility to engage in social action.
CHAPTER 5
CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF NEOORTHPRAXY

McLaren’s postmodern epistemology leads to his deconstruction of theology and corresponding reconstruction of theology. It also leads him on a continuous search for truth which hinders him from fully developing a final reconstruction of theology. The absence of a definitive doctrinal basis supports the development of his neoorthopraxy which strives to be orthodox in its pragmatism but fails to be orthodox due to its dismissal of essential doctrines of orthodoxy.

Since his epistemological views make it difficult for him to attach orthodoxy to his neoorthopraxy, he develops an “ethical universalism” which extends salvation to all people and calls on them to assist one another and God in the removal of injustice from this world because present creation, in his opinion, has never fallen completely from its original goodness and people have never fallen completely from their original relational status with God. McLaren’s universalistic view of creation allows him to revisit Scripture and find a new metanarrative in Christ’s teachings on the Kingdom of God.

The good news of God’s Kingdom is focused on simply informing people of their citizenship within it and calling upon them to engage in telling others about their

728 McLaren acknowledges sin and its effects on humanity and creation. Even so, his rejection of original sin in conjunction with his view that Christ’s death frees humanity from condemnation allows humanity to keep their original relational status. This status is based on God’s love which, according to McLaren, causes Him to refuse to punish sins with a final condemnation that remains free of grace.
citizenship while being vigilant in their social action as a means to assist God in the restoration process. This good news of the Kingdom of God, which McLaren also calls his “participatory eschatology,” becomes a postmodern incarnational theology, a theology that brings radical good news of great joy for all the people, good news that God loves the world and didn’t send Jesus to condemn it but to save it, good news that God's wrath is not merely punitive but restorative, good news that the fire of God's holiness is not bent on eternal torment but always works to purify and refine, good news that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.  

Since McLaren is “seeking to faithfully incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ—the gospel of the [K]ingdom of God available to all through Jesus,” this chapter will make a critical assessment of incarnational theology in relation to postmodern culture and McLaren’s postmodern epistemology which promotes Kingdom theology upon which McLaren constructs his neoorthopraxy. First, it does so by developing a biblical incarnational theology and demonstrating its incongruence with postmodern epistemology as propounded by McLaren. Second, it examines the appropriate relationship of social action and evangelism within Kingdom theology. Third, it determines the connection between God’s Kingdom and the Person of Christ in Scripture. Finally, it shows how McLaren’s epistemological stance leads him toward a non-orthodox Christology.

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Incarnational Theology

An incarnational witness, in the view of conservative evangelicals, is a Christian who understands and practices mission in such a way that the gospel message is communicated through Christlike actions, behavior, and verbal proclamation of witnesses. Darrell L. Guder puts it this way, “Interpreting the mission in terms of the incarnation can be understood as an attempt to define what it means for a very human church to be obedient to the call of Jesus Christ as Lord, to do [H]is will as it communicates [H]is message.” The following section explores contours of incarnational theology and demonstrates how postmodern epistemology causes incarnational witnesses to be ineffective in sharing the gospel.

Postmodernism and Incarnational Theology

Raschke believes that postmodern Christianity is incarnational. Bosch observes that the Western Church has developed an incarnational theology which is largely restricted to the origin of Christ and crucifixion. While Bosch acknowledges that such a view is biblical, he believes that it neglects Christ’s life which should never be separated from His death. Such separation may lead to an inadequate incarnational theology which teaches individuals how to be saved but neglects to prepare individuals to live out their Christian witness in their lives and within their communities.

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734 Ibid., 513.
In contrast to traditional incarnational theology of some Western Christians, Raschke proposes a postmodern incarnational theology which combines the gospel message with an active Christian witness. According to Raschke, “the mystery of the incarnation is constantly unfurling in the body of believers who affirm the message of the gospel, which is not a verbal content so much as it is the embodiment of love in active relationship, of ‘being Jesus’ to others.”

To be fair, one should understand Raschke’s view on incarnational theology in light of a typical modernist understanding which understands Christ’s incarnation primarily in terms of personal salvation and logical constructions in the education of Christians.

As a postmodernist, Raschke seeks to bring the truth of Christ’s incarnation beyond simple head knowledge and beyond simple application to eternal life. Instead, he wishes to weld it to the believer’s witness within a community. While many Christians, both modern and postmodern, are probably in agreement with Raschke on the importance of an incarnational witness, some express concern that an emphasis on actions of believers may lead to evangelistic proclamation being silenced. Despite the importance of delivering the gospel through verbal proclamation, Christian lifestyles are no less important especially since “[t]he postmodern mindset sees truth as relative to who said it, and in what circumstances.”

By promoting Christians as incarnational witnesses, modern and postmodern Christians will be challenged to overcome their tendency to individualize and privatize

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735 Raschke, *GloboChrist*, 64.

their faith by taking on a greater responsibility when sharing Christ’s love within and to their communities. Like those who joined the Early Church after witnessing the lives of Christ, His Apostles, and the martyrs, postmodernists need to be confronted not only with gospel proclamation, but also with an incarnational witness that testifies to truth therein. A person who observed the Apostles and the martyrs may have continued to deny the gospel they proclaimed, but they would have found it quite difficult to deny their faith as incarnational witnesses.

While many Christians regard the Great Commission as a directive from God telling all Christians to engage in evangelism, Raschke understands the Great Commission as a postmodern call to all Christians to become Christ to the world. He writes, “The Great Commission . . . rests upon the great postmodern proposition—the ‘with’ of divine relation as contrasted with the ‘is’ of doctrinal propositions.”737 Sweet agrees with Rashcke: “The incarnational Christian realizes that the gospel travels through time not in some ideal form, but from one inculturated form to another.”738 Incarnational Christianity, according to Rashke and Sweet, is founded on one’s relationship with God whereby individuals become a sort of living gospel, a characteristic which Michael Slaughter and Warren Bird believes to be a primary characteristic of the Emerging Church.739

Throughout the modern era, the Great Commission, at least in the West, was seen primarily as a call to convert non-believers to Christian faith. Bosch, however,

739 Slaughter and Bird, *Unlearning Church*, 24.
argues that conversion should not be seen simply as an act confined to a particular place and time but as a lifestyle that incorporates an incarnational witness through both word and deeds.\textsuperscript{740} Despite his emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to serve their communities, Bosch still upholds evangelism to be the primary responsibility of Christians.\textsuperscript{741} Even so, he regards evangelism as inseparable with an incarnational witness (through social action) because service produces a powerful Christian witness among non-believers.\textsuperscript{742}

An incarnational approach to mission in the postmodern era, Raschke argues, may require churches to do away with their traditional structures and methods as their primary means of doing mission by supplanting them with Christ-filled believers who actively engage people in their daily life outside the walls of their churches.\textsuperscript{743} Regardless of structures and methods employed, Bosch calls on Christians to follow Christ’s example of focusing on people by serving them as opposed to maintaining “rules and rituals” and “ruling over them” with divine truths.\textsuperscript{744} Bosch, in effect, is calling for a moratorium on the view that discipleship is a matter of education; instead, he contends that discipleship is a way of life and that life is one of service.\textsuperscript{745}

\textsuperscript{740} Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 117.

\textsuperscript{741} Ibid., 404.

\textsuperscript{742} Ibid., 414.

\textsuperscript{743} Raschke, \textit{GloboChrist}, 63.

\textsuperscript{744} Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 36.

\textsuperscript{745} Ibid., 38.
To engage people effectively in the postmodern era, incarnational witnesses, according to Jenkins, should do away with presuppositions that originate from their own cultural heritage and be willing to take revealed truths from Scripture into a new culture. In Africa, for example, Jenkins comments on the importance of giving spiritual solutions to common health problems and not just medical solutions.\textsuperscript{746} Raschke, like Jenkins, believes that “[B]eing Jesus” to others by removing one’s culture from one’s evangelical witness and modeling Christ to others is the essence of a postmodern Christian witness.\textsuperscript{747}

This postmodern witness, while modeling Christ to others and serving their needs, may be in danger of placing too little importance on verbal content because people in the postmodern era are often quite comfortable with those who have different views so long as they do not express them verbally.\textsuperscript{748} To communicate the gospel with postmodernists, evangelicals need to do more than simply deliver a verbal proclamation. This is not to suggest that evangelicals relinquish their commitment to sound theology and verbal proclamation nor should they give equal status to both theology and experience. It does suggest, however, that evangelicals develop an incarnational theology of the Christian witness that communicates the gospel in word and deed as it has been revealed in Scripture in such a way that the receptor hears and experiences gospel communication. Incarnational theology may also empower the witness of postmodern Christians who prefer to combine experience and truth.

\textsuperscript{746}Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity, 103.

\textsuperscript{747}Raschke, GloboChrist, 64.

\textsuperscript{748}Ibid.
Postmodern Preference for Service

Postmodern Christians, however, may simply find it far easier to live out their faith instead of verbally communicating the gospel even when non-Christians are most open to hearing a verbal proclamation. Toby Jones, who is acutely aware of postmodern wariness for objective truths, believes that Christians who are performing acts of service should not communicate the gospel verbally because he believes that serving others as a means to verbally communicate the gospel is not Christlike. Pagitt, who holds a similar view, believes that it is “a little racist and even patronizing” to perform social ministries with the intent of “‘sav[ing] the neighborhood’ or ‘bring[ing] light’” to it.

Noting the importance of social services done in connection with evangelism, George G. Hunter III develops an evangelistic model that invites non-believers to engage in Christian social ministries as a means of introducing them to the loving God who sent His Son. This model may have relevance in America’s postmodern, unchurched culture especially among those who perceive themselves as not needing church ministries. Evangelistic models that focus on performing social services to gain a listening audience to the gospel message among those served may need to consider Hunter’s model among those communities that seem to either not need or not desire social ministries. Steve Chalke and Anthony Watkis, however, believe that Christ’s example allows for non-confrontational verbal evangelism coinciding with Christian


750 Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, *Church Re-Imagined*, 206.

service but warns against using “service as a backdoor to proselytizing (attempting to force others to convert) or an opportunity to harangue others about [one’s] faith.”

Serving others alone, according to Chalke, will communicate the message of Christ if it is done with love. Given Chalke’s condemnation of dividing sacred and secular as unbiblical, one wonders how verbal communication of sacred Scripture can be divorced from ministry. Like Chalke, McLaren appeals to an incarnational witness which emphasizes service as primary means of evangelism due to his postmodern epistemology which limits verbal communication to stories and dialogue: “Good evangelism is the process of being friendly without discrimination and influencing all of one’s friends toward a better living, through good deeds and good conversations.”

**Effect of Postmodern Epistemology**

While McLaren’s incarnational evangelism may be “friendly,” it is not evangelism because it stops short of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It focuses on Christ’s self-giving example by practicing His way but avoids making any exclusive truth claims. Since his incarnational theology prevents him from making these claims, he prefers to engage others in conversations about various stories within Scripture that

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754 Ibid., 18.


discuss the gospel. Even so, incarnational witnesses, who engage in conversation with others about the gospel while adhering to McLaren’s postmodern epistemology, have little to say in regard to the gospel other than to tell the story as it is written in Scripture. Some may suggest that this is all that is required in sharing of the gospel, but such a position renders explanations within the NT Epistles to have been unnecessary. By applying McLaren’s epistemological views to one’s gospel presentation, one may end up sharing the gospel as a story without any explanation, confirmation, or condemnation of anyone’s views about it or its meaning.

Given McLaren’s postmodern epistemology and a pragmatic theory of truth, a person presenting the gospel may still be able to share truths mentioned by Christ and events from Christ’s life but only as mysteries written by human authors who were incapable of making reliable interpretations. While McLaren reduces Scripture to mystery in the present day, his understanding of epistemology, if it is correct, should be applied to all biblical authors including eyewitnesses who recorded what they saw in the Gospels. As a result of such an application, one could argue that McLaren is left without a gospel. McLaren may object and say that their words are authoritative because they experienced Christ firsthand. Various differences between Gospel accounts reveal that there was some interpretation involved. This is not to suggest that their interpretations were not consistent in meaning when viewed together, but that consistency may wind up being a coincidence if one accepts McLaren’s understanding of epistemology.

Even if Gospel authors were able to record events that they each experienced accurately, it does not follow that they were able to infer any objective truth from those events if they were confined to McLaren’s epistemological position. They simply saw
something and recorded it without really understanding what it was that they recorded. If this is so, it seems ridiculous that they would have recorded the same event in unison because how could they know that those events associated with Christ had any more meaning than other events of their day.

Assuming that these authors were able to overcome the limitations of McLaren’s understanding of epistemology by actually knowing something with certainty and therefore recording it, the Gospels may still serve a somewhat meaningless purpose because those who read them are incapable, according to McLaren, of being able to recognize truth. As previously mentioned, readers, McLaren argues, can tell, hear, and converse about the Gospels, but they can never be certain of events within Christ’s life because they never personally experienced them (even if that would help) and they are completely unable to be certain about the meanings of these events themselves.

Applying McLaren’s views on epistemology to his incarnational theology renders it a theology which effectively gives primacy to deeds with little need for verbal proclamation. Any such verbal proclamation, though it may be given by one holding McLaren’s views, is little more than a presentation of one’s understanding of the gospel at a given time that is always subject to change. The lack of a clear and definitive verbal proclamation is a critical departure from conservative evangelism and requires a response which demonstrates a necessity for verbal proclamation. The next section will provide such a response and discuss the relationship of proclamation and social action within incarnational evangelism.
Social Action and the Kingdom of God

Should incarnational witnesses be focused on social action or evangelism? Should their focus be exclusively on one or the other? Or should they develop a holistic model that calls for evangelism (verbal proclamation and social service) and social action to occur simultaneously? To develop an appropriate evangelical response to the association of evangelism and social action, this section discusses the relationship of verbal proclamation, social service, and social action within evangelism.

Evangelism and Social Service

Even though participants at Lausanne 1974 chose to define evangelism primarily in terms of verbal proclamation, they considered social service to be a partner in forming a holistic, incarnational witness but also acknowledged a wide variety of positions of Christians and churches on the place of social action within the Christian witness. Given their hesitancy in forming a definitive position on Christian responsibility in regard to social action, it may be wise to accept diversity among Christians on this matter. That being said, subsequent discussion will address the relationship of social service to evangelism and follow it with a discussion on the relationship between evangelism and social action.

Generally, Evangelicals do not reject Christ’s call to serve others. However, they are concerned about social service being included in one’s definition of evangelism because they are concerned about verbal proclamation of the gospel. While all

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757 Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 21, Evangelism and Social Responsibility.

Christians need to be committed to making a verbal proclamation of the gospel, they should never view receptors of their communication as no more than prospects for Christianity. When this happens, the Christian obligation to love one’s neighbor becomes limited to telling one’s neighbor the gospel.

To avoid such limitations, Delos Miles argues that Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor (the cultural, ethical, and social mandate) should be combined with the Great Commission.\textsuperscript{759} If one agrees with Edgar Krentz that Matthew’s Gospel is “a missionary text” because it leads up to the Great Commission, then one may want to reconsider mission in that light.\textsuperscript{760} Viewed this way, mission goes beyond verbal proclamation by including social service as part of the Christian evangelical witness.\textsuperscript{761} Sider agrees and argues that “evangelism involves the announcement through ‘word and deed’ of the good news that there is forgiveness of sins through the cross.”\textsuperscript{762}

\textit{Responsibility}, ed. Bruce Nicholls (UK: Paternoster, 1985), 194. In this Luke 10:25-37, Jesus informs the expert of the law that the second greatest commandment is to love one’s neighbor. When one reads the parable of the Good Samaritan, one observes that the Samaritan performs a social ministry devoid of gospel proclamation. Commenting on this parable, Samuel and Sugden argue that Jesus was condemning the Jewish priests and Levites for placing “priority [on] religious duties” while neglecting to share God’s love with people. While Jesus certainly was not trying to deemphasize the verbal witness, he does demonstrate the call on all his followers to actively express their love for others.


To be sure, verbal proclamation of God’s Word to a gathering of people is certainly well-founded in Scripture. However, such proclamation of the Word to a crowd en masse allows each individual to remain anonymous and unaccountable for his choices following the proclamation of God’s Word. Under such circumstances, the audience may become trapped in a recurring cycle of hearing the same message while rendering little to no active response in their daily lives. These faithful listeners may become nothing more because they are challenged to do little more than attend regularly. Such an approach to discipleship may be based on the belief that Christian education leads to Christian practice. Olu E. Alana, who advocates this view, believes that Bible study, prayer, and sermons are the primary components of discipleship because “[t]rue discipleship is . . . determined by a person’s commitment to practi[c]ing the values and principles learned from reflecting on Jesus Christ.” While most evangelicals would readily agree, one should note that the Twelve received their education not only through reflection on God’s word, prayer, and listening to Christ’s words but through interaction with Him which included verbal interaction, opportunities to observe His lifestyle, and opportunities to act out their newfound faith.

While the intentions of evangelicals may be seen as honorable, it should be noted that their attention is sometimes focused somewhat heavily on the individual at the expense of society at large. Bosch states that this approach to mission causes their adherents to ignore present needs of those in this world because all of their attention is on

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future realities and on themselves. Emphasis on proclamation may also hinder missions because proclamation is typically done by a handful of trained leaders, whereas regular members simply continue to listen to proclamation indefinitely.

Norma Cook Everist agrees by saying, “When witness and service are not attempted, the parishioner, as it were, never leaves the pew, or never leaves the pew with the Word.” With the aforementioned in mind, incarnational witnesses should engage in evangelism that includes both word and deed (verbal proclamation and social service) even while they may choose to engage in social action. This dichotomy between social action and social service serves only to remind believers of their responsibility to manifest an incarnational witness that genuinely loves people and desires that they know Christ.

Current Debate over Relationship of Evangelism and Social Action

If incarnational witnesses express their love for others actively, then what is their responsibility in regard to social action? Should evangelists be merely concerned with verbal proclamation or do they have a responsibility in regard to social action? José D. Fajardo prefers to integrate social action and gospel proclamation. While one may perceive him as simply another advocate of the social gospel, a careful analysis of his position demonstrates his strong commitment to evangelism. He is not suggesting that social action should become the exclusive preoccupation of Christians, but he does

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L. Bruce Miller polarizes the position of those advocating a social gospel and those advocating traditional evangelicalism when he states, “Social Gospelers want to talk about the crises of [the] globalized economy while right wing journalists want to talk about the deity of Christ.”\footnote{L. Bruce Miller, “Updating the Social Gospel for the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century,” \textit{Religious Studies and Theology} 22 (2003): 33. “Right wing” is to be understood as a reference to evangelicals based on the context. Given the emphasis of this paper on the importance of social action and social service, further discussion on the social gospel will help the reader see the distinction between the social gospel and the promotion of the incarnational witness found in this paper.} Miller’s goal is to refocus Christians on this world instead of the world to come. The social gospel, which he embraces, relegates human fallenness to their social structures so that humanity remains essentially good because social structures are mostly to blame for evil in the present world. This view and the position of Social Gospelers in general most certainly do not align with what it means to be an incarnational witness. An incarnational witness places primacy on verbal proclamation while loving those in the community even to the extent of doing whatever can be done to effect positive change in social structures. An incarnational witness holds to sound biblical theology which teaches human fallenness. Any fallenness in human institutions should be regarded as the result of human fallenness, not vice versa.

To avoid creating dichotomy between verbal proclamation evangelism and social action, J. Chongnahm Cho calls for Christian leaders to teach an incarnational faith...
which “involves a costly discipleship that will confront social, economic, and political injustice.”\textsuperscript{768} Cho’s definition of the incarnational witness includes social action. To understand what it means to be an incarnational witness, one should consider the extent to which witnesses are obligated to engage in social action as a part of their witness.

Those concerned with social action in the past often adhered to the social gospel which sought to proclaim and establish God’s Kingdom in the present world through social action aimed at driving necessary changes in society at large.\textsuperscript{769} The social gospel is widely embraced by postmodern Christians (that is, Christians who are more influenced by their postmodern culture than truths within Scripture) who are trapped in a secular humanistic worldview that focuses on people and their experiences. The social gospel aims directly at improving individual and communal experience with very little attention given to God and the hereafter.\textsuperscript{770} Some scholars, like Ronald J. Sider and James Parker III, even suggest that unjust social structures prevent Christians from attaining their “full wholeness.”\textsuperscript{771} The idea that social structures can malign the discipleship process of Christians, if embraced, may lead to a Liberation Theology.


\textsuperscript{770} Donald A. McGavran, “Missiology Faces the Lion,” \textit{Missiology} 17 (1989): 335-341. McGavran discusses the danger of neglecting the Great Commission as the primary focus of mission. He offers some historical evidence which demonstrates that the elevation of humanitarian services within mission work can eventually lead to a stifling of evangelism.

contrast to this view, one should consider Christ’s witness and the incarnational witness of His followers in Scripture who remained faithful to Him despite unjust social structures that existed in their time.

While Liberation Theology adhered to a social gospel focused on society and sought to redeem it in the present, fundamentalists tended to place their focus on individuals and sought to redeem them from the fallen present in preparation for a heavenly future. The primary vehicle used by them to cause life change has been and still is proclamation. Placement of priority on proclamation is rejected by C. René Padilla, who believes the decision to engage in verbal witness and/or social ministry should be based on context.\textsuperscript{772} Taking a more extreme position, Valdir R. Steuernagel writes that placing priority on verbal witness “diminishes the Gospel and impoverishes the task of evangelization.”\textsuperscript{773} Steuernagel’s goal is not to diminish the importance of verbal proclamation; rather, he seeks to broaden evangelism to include social responsibility, an understanding which he believes was missing in Lausanne 1974.\textsuperscript{774} J. Andrew Kirk agrees and argues that evangelism should be defined “as making known, both by word

\textsuperscript{772}C. René Padilla, \textit{Mission Between the Times} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 197-98.


and deed, the good news about Jesus and the [K]ingdom [so that] social action becomes an integral part of one and the same task.”

“[M]odern evangelism,” Sider argues, tends to focus on repentance of personal sin and a restoration of a “vertical relationship with God.” Sider highlights a weakness of the Western church with its individualistic culture that neglects the needs of communities and the need for community. His arguments show the importance of rebuilding relationships with church members and society through word and deed. Viewing the gospel as Good News of the Kingdom, for Sider, brings the idea of community forth, whereas focusing on personal salvation keeps individuals separated and unaware of the community and their responsibility within their community.

The renewed emphasis on community has certainly caused many Christians to reconsider their role not only within the Christian community but also with communities at large. While some would limit their responsibility to others to various acts of kindness, Sider argues that Christians should engage in social transformation by becoming actively involved in political activism especially when social structures inhibit one’s ability to follow Christ’s mandates. Valson Thampu, who supports Christian involvement in

775. J. Andrew Kirk, Good News of the Kingdom Coming (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 97, 103. Kirk argues that those who limit the definition of evangelism only to verbal proclamation are making “the false assumption that communication of the message can be restricted to the verbal statement of certain propositions.”

776. Ibid., 104-105.

777. Ibid., 35-36.
social action, admonishes believers to practice self-denial while maintaining reliance on God even while they initiate positive change in society.\textsuperscript{778}

In support of Christian involvement in social action, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden argue “Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees was that they separated obedience of the law from its meaning in the social context and made loving God a priority and a possibility independent of loving the neighbor [sic].”\textsuperscript{779} In response, one ought to consider whether or not love for one’s neighbor extends beyond activities that transpire relationally to socio-political activism against ‘unjust’ social structures which are opposed to the Christian message of brotherly love. John Stott, who distinguishes between evangelism and social action, connects both to the Christian witness and argues that neither one be cast aside in favor of the other:

Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless [those present] affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are expressions of [the] doctrines of God and man, [one’s] love for [one’s] neighbor, and [one’s obedience to Jesus Christ].\textsuperscript{780}

According to Stott, Christians have a responsibility to Christianize social structures within their community. John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller agree and call for a reexamination of “theological presupposition” because “any renewal of the political order requires a renewal of theology.”\textsuperscript{781} Their position has immediate implications for those


\textsuperscript{779} Samuel and Sugden, “Evangelism and Social Responsibility,” 201.

\textsuperscript{780} John Stott, \textit{The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary} (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 25.

\textsuperscript{781} John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller, “Theopoetic/Theopolitic,” \textit{Cross}
Christians who have long been content to divorce their personal lives from a society that has, among other things, legalized abortion and embraced gay rights.

**Critical Response to the Debate**

Whereas McLaren’s Kingdom of God metanarrative focuses on social action, Arthur F. Glasser uses it to combine social action and evangelism. He supports his contention by appealing to the “cultural mandate” given by God to Adam and Eve as representatives of humanity. This mandate is God’s directive to humanity to care for and oversee creation. Just as marriage between one man and one woman has been ordained by God, so has caring for creation by humanity. Glasser assigns the duty of caring for God’s creation to the Church. God’s directive, however, was given to all humanity. Surely the Church may decide to participate in social action at some level just as they participate in marriage ceremonies. But should the Church grant social action the same level of primacy as Christ’s call to evangelism?

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783 Martha Kirkpatrick, “‘For God So Loved the World’: An Incarnational Ecology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 91 (2009): 191, 199. Kirkpatrick argues that the cultural mandate is connected with the Incarnation based on God’s covenant with Noah and the animals in Genesis 9:8-17. This ‘covenant of love,’ Kirkpatrick writes, suggests that God loves all of His creation; therefore, all of His creation remains inseparable. Given this assertion, Kirkpatrick believes Christ’s incarnation has redemptive ramifications for all creation. His incarnational ecology may broaden incarnational theology beyond the intentions of the biblical authors. While it is true that God loves His creation, the meaning of Christ’s incarnation seems to be very pointed to the restoration of God’s relationship with humanity. Once His relationship is fully restored, all creation will benefit.

784 Glasser et al, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 38.
In Matthew 15:22-24, Jesus tells a Canaanite woman seeking His help that He was sent to Israel. Even though Jesus eventually helps her, His interaction with her reveals that He was not focused on all of the world’s problems. His exclusive focus on Jews suggests that any church considering its role in social action should be hesitant to give it the same level of priority as evangelism.

In John 12:3-8, Jesus rebukes His disciples when they express their concern that expensive perfume, which a woman had poured on Him, should have been sold to generate money for poor people. He affirms the woman’s actions and assigns Himself a place above those who are poor. Like the story of the Canaanite woman, this story teaches that evangelism (calling people to Christ) takes precedence over social action.

An examination of Christian responsibilities toward social structures in light of Paul’s example and Early Church history may help Christians determine their role in their community. Paul certainly preached truth and lived it out within communities. Most of Paul’s direct and even harsh instructions are directed toward Christians whom he is admonishing to remain faithful in their witness. His discourse with non-believing, Jewish religious leaders may provide biblical justification for Christians to engage in social action. Even so, when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin in Acts 22 and 23, he focused his message on the gospel instead of how to integrate biblical morals into political structures.

Paul continues to remain unfocused on ‘Christianizing’ social structures when he gives instructions to masters and slaves (cf. Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-24; 4:1; Titus 2:9-10). Instead of arguing for change in social structures that supported slavery, Paul focused his message to the slaves themselves. He repeatedly admonishes them to obey their masters
in everything. This submissive approach to the social evils of slavery is reminiscent of Christ’s submissive approach to His crucifixion.

Paul’s instruction of submission and Christ’s example on the cross can be seen in the lives of martyrs who were willing to submit their lives before an unjust social structure rather than compromise their faith. To be sure, they knew that some social structures during their day were flawed, but their deaths were a testimony to their faith in Christ and not to their views on contemporary political evils. Christians in the Early Church, Michael Green notes, maintained “a strongly transcendental perspective” in the face of their growing understanding of the gospel’s implications for social evils in their day. Even so, the heavenly focus of early Christians, Green adds, caused them to live out God’s will in their daily lives.

A heavenly focus, however, did not keep these Christians from situations and concerns that face them in their daily life. As Christians, they were certainly commanded en masse to engage in acts of love to those around them and that may have even included their behaviors in regard to socio-political structures of their day. Whether they engaged social action or not and how they might have behaved as change agents in the midst of unjust social structures should not have imperiled their verbal and behavioral proclamation of the gospel. Evangelism, therefore, includes Christ’s message spoken by a verbal witness. If it is done in an obedient manner, the verbal witness will be following

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786 Ibid.
Christ’s example of love and the Holy Spirit’s guidance in relation to social service and social action.

**Kingdom of God in Scripture**

George Eldon Ladd agrees that God’s Kingdom is both a present and a future reality, but then he says Christians are to submit to God’s rule in the present and look forward to “eternal life which will be experienced only after the Second Coming of Christ” (cf. Matt 21:31; Mark 9:47; 10:15; Luke 11:52; 16:16). Hesselgrave agrees with Ladd and adds that present benefits of being in God’s Kingdom include “personal blessings of peace with God, true freedom in Christ, absence of guilt, and victory over vices,” but do not include an absence of social injustice. Wells argues that the Kingdom of God “is something God is doing”:

> [Christians] can search for the [K]ingdom of God, pray for it, and look for it, for example, but only God can bring it about (Luke 12:31; 23:51; Matt. 6:10, 33). The [K]ingdom is God’s to give and to take away. It is [theirs] only to enter and accept (Matt. 21:43; Luke 12:32). [They] can inherit it, possess it, or refuse to enter it, but it is not [theirs] to build and [they] can never destroy it (Matt. 25:34; Luke 10:11). [Christians] can work for the [K]ingdom, but [they] can never act upon it. [They] can preach it, but it is God’s to establish (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9; 12:32).

Wells places the Kingdom of God completely under God’s sovereign control and presents Christians as those who are participating in it by choice. Their participation in it does not

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mean that they are able to affect it positively or negatively. Well’s definition largely focuses on the external dimension of God’s Kingdom, but Peters offers an additional point of view.

According to Peters, Paul points to “the inner man” as the place in which God’s Kingdom resides. Glasser adds, “Paul . . . did not identify the Kingdom of God in terms that reduced it to an institution or structure. The Kingdom rather represented the sovereign gift of God [H]imself to his people (Rom 14:17).” Given a wide variety of perspectives on the Kingdom, Patrick Johnstone claims that the full meaning of the Kingdom of God is indiscernible. Alan Richardson agrees and adds that it still remains a mystery because of its divine source. While full knowledge of God’s Kingdom may be the sole possession of God Himself, Scripture does offer some key insights.

The central teaching of Jesus, according to George Peters, Boyd Hunt, and Timothy D. Westergren, is the Kingdom of God, a teaching which in Peters’ view is largely a NT development that has roots in OT teaching on God’s kingship over nations and creation. To determine whether or not a particular teaching can be central to the

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790 George W. Peters, A Biblical Theology of Missions (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 40; Verkuyl, Contemporary Missiology, 197. Verkuyl also observes that the Kingdom of God teaching in the NT includes the inner man.

791 Glasser et al., Announcing the Kingdom, 293.


794 Peters, A Biblical Theology of Missions, 39-40; Boyd Hunt, Redeemed! Eschatological Redemption and the Kingdom of God (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock,
NT, Köstenberger lists two criteria: 1) it must be found throughout the NT in all of the Gospels and Paul’s Epistles; and 2) it must be “a shared, foundational belief of Jesus and the [E]arly [C]hurch.” Little believes these criteria prove that God’s Kingdom cannot be used as a unifying motif of the NT because of the Apostle John only mentions it three times. McLaren would likely disagree by pointing to a close connection (in his opinion) between ‘the Kingdom of God’ and ‘eternal life,’ a term mentioned more often by John. Even if this potential objection is dismissed, several other reasons suggests that Köstenberger’s criteria are not useful for arguing against the position that the ‘Kingdom of God’ is the central biblical theme.

Perhaps Köstenberger’s two criteria for a unifying concept should not be used in an argument against ‘the Kingdom of God’ as a unifying concept for several reasons. First, any unifying concept in Scripture should be articulated in some manner throughout both testaments. Second, Early Church believers were capable of human error as the presence of many ancient heresies confirms. Third, Christ’s beliefs were often conveyed through parables and are therefore more properly discerned through consulting the rest of


This being the case, perhaps it is best to search for a unifying motif for all of Scripture and then consider how any other motifs are working in conjunction with the unifying motif. To help assess whether or not the Kingdom of God should be a unifying motif, the next two sections will consider what Christ meant when he spoke about the mystery of God’s Kingdom in Mark 4:11.

**Mystery of the Kingdom**

So what is the mystery of the Kingdom of God? In Mark 4:11, Jesus tells His disciples a mystery (μυστήριον) which no one else knew. In this verse, μυστήριον, according to Kenneth S. Wuest, means “the secret counsels of God which are hidden from the ungodly but when revealed to the godly, are understood by them. The mystery is not in the fact that they are difficult of interpretation, but that they are impossible of interpretation until their meaning is revealed, when they become plain.”

797 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 48-51; Peter Rollins, The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2009), xi. Besides describing the Bible’s contents as a story, McLaren also says that Christ only communicated his message through parables. Some emerging leaders prefer parables because they offer a form of communication “that has less to do with fixing meaning than rendering meaning fluid and affective.” By reducing all of Christ’s recorded words to parables, McLaren is able to argue that Christ’s actual meaning remains obscured. While biblical scholars affirm that Jesus often spoke in parables, many also believe that Jesus communicated His meaning more directly. Mark 4:34 confirms that Jesus spoke to the populous using only parables, but then it declares that Jesus spoke directly to the disciples. For example, Jesus taught the people by using the parable of the sower, but then He explained the meaning of this parable to the disciples when they were alone (Mark 4:1-20).

appears in divine passive form, “the knowledge of the mystery is a gift from God and not a human achievement.”

So what is the mystery? James R. Edwards argues that it is Christ Himself, the incarnate Word of God revealed in Scripture. Christ’s death at the hands of Jews indicates that they were not aware of His Incarnation, a mystery which had not been revealed to them by God. Hendrickson examines the usage of μυστήριον throughout Scripture and concludes that the term in Mark 4:11 refers to “a divinely disclosed secret, a person or a thing which apart from revelation could not have been discovered.” The mystery of God’s Kingdom in Mark 4:11, therefore, is Christ and His Incarnation and not the Kingdom of God itself. Within the verse, Mark “delimits ‘mystery’ as pertaining to the Kingdom of God” because he uses the genitive (τῆς βασιλείας του θεοῦ). While mystery may be restricted to God’s Kingdom, mystery does not have to be equated with it.


800 Ibid.


According to Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and not Himself because the Kingdom was Christ’s primary teaching. Noting that Mark 4:11 in relation to Matthew 13:11-12, Rudolph Otto poses an interesting question: “What is that which one person has, in order to obtain ever more of it until he has an abundance, and which another person has not, and this in such a way that not having results in his losing even the little which he has? It is just the capacity of being able to see and hear spiritually, of being open to the mystery from above.” In his response, Otto suggests that Christ’s mystery is a mystery which can be known only through a personal relationship to Him.

According to Ladd, μυστήριον in Mark 4:11 is the inauguration of God’s Kingdom in this world that has been revealed to those who believe in Christ. Kelly Scott Malone points out that Ladd equates “the mission of the church” with “the proclamation of the eschatological [K]ingdom of God, which has invaded the present age in Jesus.” The church then becomes a “result of the [K]ingdom” instead of being the

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result of coming to know Christ. Malone’s point is well-taken because overwhelming biblical support exists to support his argument. OT prophecies certainly focused heavily on the Messiah’s coming, the Gospels offer a detailed account of Christ’s life, and the Apostles spent much time with Christ before His death and preached Christ after Pentecost.

While some suggest μυστήριον is the inauguration of God’s Kingdom in the present, Mark’s Gospel contains significant evidence to suggest μυστήριον is particularly focused on the person of Christ who initiates the inauguration. First, Jesus intentionally conceals His identity when demons speak out loud concerning Him (Mark 1:24-25, 34). Second, He heals Jairus’ dead daughter and then tells everyone to keep it secret (Mark 5:43). Third, despite the disciples lack of understanding regarding Christ’s teaching, the μυστήριον of God’s Kingdom had already been given to them (Mark 4:11-13). Fourth, the disciples were still dumfounded concerning Christ’s actions in feeding five thousand people (Mark 6:52). Fifth, Jesus asked His disciples about His identity and their response indicates they knew He was God’s Messiah. Even so, Jesus still wants this fact concealed from other people. Sixth, the disciples do not understand Jesus when He foretells His death and resurrection (Mark 9:31-32). Seventh, when Jesus makes a post-resurrection appearance to some disciples on the Emmaus Road, they fail to recognize Him at first and still remain uncertain about events associated with Christ’s life and death (Luke 24). In Luke 24:45-49, Jesus enables His disciples to understand the mystery of God’s Kingdom by opening up Scripture and explaining events of His life and death to them.

Ibid., 94.
Kingdom of God in Paul's Epistles

Evidence gathered so far from the Gospels suggests that Jesus is the mystery of the Kingdom and His person is the metanarrative of Scripture. But what does Paul have to say on the subject? If evidence gathered so far is indeed correct, then it should follow that Paul is in agreement. This section will consider Paul’s teaching on the Kingdom in relation to Christ.

According to McLaren, the mystery, to which Paul is referring to in Ephesians 1:9 and Colossians 1:27 is the offer of reconciliation of all people through Christ and their reunification within God’s Kingdom:

God has chosen to make known this great message, which had for long ages been a complete secret. It is an unprecedented, radically inclusive message. It is not just for the Jewish people but for people of all cultures. The secret is unspeakably rich and glorious, and here it is—the secret message, the mystery of the [K]ingdom of God: that Christ the King indwells you, which means that his [K]ingdom is within and among you here and now. This secret message—Christ the King in and among us here and now—invites us into a reconciled and reconciling movement and expanding network of relationships. This is the glorious hope for which we have all been waiting for so long.  

According to Andrew T. Lincoln, μυστήριον, in Ephesians 1:9, is referring “to an event which has already been realized in the community.” Thomas Aquinas believes this event to be Christ’s Incarnation because Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 makes Christ the focal point of his gospel and Jesus in John 3:16 says God’s will was to send Him.  


Evidence for his suggestion is found in Paul’s use of προτίθεμαι which demonstrates “God’s pretemporal resolve . . . to make known the mystery [which] has always had its focus in Christ.”

Kenneth S. Wuest adds that the mystery, once revealed, is easily understood by believers.

In Colossians 1:27-28, Paul, Peter T. O’Brien, H. C. G. Moule, and Murray J. Harris contend, connects μυστήριον with the incarnated life of Christ within the believer by modifying it with Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν. This expression, James D. G. Dunn opines, “demonstrates a shift in focus from the goal (reconciliation of Jew and Gentile) to the means (‘Christ’).” Eduard Lohse, however, disagrees and thinks that μυστήριον refers to “Christ [being] preached among the nations” because he defines μυστήριον to be “the secret of God’s eschatological decree.”

According to O’Brien, the verb γνωρίζω in context indicates that the μυστήριον had already been revealed: It “does not have to do

811 Lincoln, Ephesians, 31.


with some future event that lies hidden in God’s plan, but refers to His decisive action in Christ in the here and now. 816

**The Kingdom and Gnosticism**

Raschke criticizes McLaren’s gospel of the Kingdom as a “mysterious and slippery ‘something beyond religion’” religion that compares with “perennialism, esotericism, Gnosticism, [and] New Age religion.” 817 Raschke makes this connection because of McLaren’s presentation of God’s Kingdom as ultimately an unknowable secret, a concept which McLaren develops most extensively in *The Secret Message of Jesus*. 818 Howard W. Clarke connects ‘the Kingdom of God’ message with Gnosticism: “Gnosticism . . . was divorced from Judaism, with its Scriptures and laws, and from the historical Jesus, whom it came to regard not as a Redeemer but as a teacher or ‘reveler.’ For Gnostics, the ‘[K]ingdom of God’ was not to be found in any text, but was discovered within by each believer.” 819 Like the Gnostics, McLaren presents ‘the Kingdom of God’ as a secret message, hidden in “metaphor and story” known (though without certainty due to his postmodernism) by him and taught to his audience who

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818 McLaren, *Secret Message of Jesus*, 81-103; Phyllis Tickle, Peter Rollins, Brian McLaren, and N. T. Wright, “The Gospel of the Kingdom,” *Rising from the Ashes: Rethinking Church*, interview by Becky Garrison (New York: Seabury, 2007), 50. In the interview, McLaren states that he began he book “with the hypothesis that the message of the [K]ingdom was at the center of what Jesus taught” and finished “convinced it was the center of not only what he said but what he did.”

likewise can learn this message by revelation through personal stories and nature as a whole even while they can never have certainty of its contents.820

In making an assessment of McLaren’s suggestion that stories are a source for revelation, one should consider Peter’s testimony: “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 3:16). Instead of stories, Peter appeals to the person of Christ and facts concerning Him and even warns that false teachers use stories to deceive people (2 Peter 2:3). These false teachers are warned against in Scripture, and believers are told to compare their teachings with Scripture as opposed to their own stories (Matt 24:23-25; 2 Thess 2; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11). By appealing to personal stories and nature, McLaren effectively takes an approach similar to the Gnostics as outlined by Clarke, namely, he denies Christ as Redeemer and relegates him to the status of a revealer.

Critical Response to Brian D. McLaren

An examination of Paul’s writings suggests that the mystery of the Kingdom is centered around Christ, His Incarnation, His Name being preached, and His person being received. Evidence from Paul in conjunction with that taken already from the Gospels and the rest of Scripture demonstrates that Jesus Himself is the mystery of the Kingdom, namely God’s salvation to those who repent and believe. He, as the mystery, was revealed to Jews and then to Gentiles through the work of His Apostles. This conclusion

820 McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 47, 102, 196-97; Mohler, Jr. et al., “Panel Discussion – A New Kind of Christianity?” Mohler detects Gnosticism in A New Kind of Christianity.
draws further support from Isaiah who prophesied that the Messiah would be revealed (Isa 56:1; 65:1), John the Baptist who looked forward to the revelation of Christ (John 1:31), Christ who had the ability to reveal God (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22), and Peter who receives revelation about Christ’s Lordship (Matt 16:17). Paul adds further weight to the conclusion that Christ’s person is the central message of Scripture. He preaches the gospel of Christ which reveals His righteousness (Rom 1:1-16), claims Christ to be the hidden revelation in prophetic writings which has now been made known (Rom 16:25-26), and declares God’s salvation to be revealed through Christ’s Incarnation (2 Tim 1:10).

In contrast, McLaren agrees on the central importance of Christ in regard to Scripture and the Kingdom of God. However, he perceives Christ as a personal Subject and his understanding of epistemology ultimately prevents him from having any assurance about objective information concerning Christ’s person. This, in effect, may allow him to remain uncertain about prophecies found in Isaiah, delivered by Christ to His disciples, and testified to by His Apostles. When the revelation of Christ is no longer considered objective or one’s epistemology prevents one from receiving revelation as such, all that is left is either myth or mystery. McLaren clearly chooses mystery and gravitates in his thinking toward Christ’s teaching on the mystery of God’s Kingdom in Mark 4:11. The mystery, as previously discussed, refers to the person of Christ who McLaren cannot identify objectively. Given his dilemma, McLaren continues to proclaim the mystery of God’s Kingdom and believes it to be his duty to promote it to be Christ’s message.
Since McLaren proclaims that nothing can be known to be objective truth with absolute certainty, then, it follows that his conclusion about the Kingdom of God being Christ’s mystery is not a conclusion based on objective evidence. McLaren’s position on God’s Kingdom should rightly be considered a point of conjecture even by McLaren. This section has made the case that the mystery of God’s Kingdom is indeed the person of Christ based on objective evidence within Scripture that was revealed to humanity through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s Incarnation, and the work of human agents who are sent by God.  

Person of Christ

To further understand McLaren’s view of the person of Christ and how he arrives at God’s Kingdom being the mystery of Mark 4:11, an assessment will now be made of his interpretation of John 14:6, a key verse appealed to by conservative evangelicals to support their conclusion that Christ is the mystery addressed by Mark. McLaren himself acknowledges that this verse “is frequently quoted to defend an idea called the ‘exclusivity of Christ,’ namely, that all who do not consciously and decisively accept Jesus as their personal savior will burn forever in hell.” Subsequent discussion first offers McLaren’s interpretation in conjunction with his contemporaries in the Emerging Church. Then, an analysis with critical commentary will be performed on John 14:6. Finally, this section offers a critical response that refutes McLaren’s interpretation.

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Within McLaren’s Great Commission, he makes a reference to John 14:6 in which Jesus declares, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Howard puts McLaren’s view succinctly: “Jesus did not claim to teach [people] the way, [H]e claimed to BE The Way. Jesus did not claim to teach the truth, he claimed to BE The Truth. Jesus did not claim to show us how to live life, he claimed to BE The Life.”

Sweet and Frank Viola agree with McLaren as well: “According to Scripture, Jesus Christ (and not a doctrine about Him) is the truth. In addition, Jesus Christ (and not an ethic derived from His teaching) is the way. In other words, both God’s truth and God’s way are embodied in a living, breathing person―Christ.”

Christ’s way, Bell contends, “is the best possible way for a person to live” but stops short of calling it the only way. Jones, who also comments on John 14:6, argues that while Jesus’ statement is true, objective truths derived from Christ’s words are unique to each interpreter and therefore diverse meanings can be derived from Christ’s words.
Joseph R. Myers interprets John 14:6 to mean Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” as a presently continuing reality that requires human participation (John 14:6).

In agreement with Myers in an unpublished chapter that was originally to be in *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren thoroughly examines John 14:6 and believe[s] Jesus primarily came not to proclaim a way out of hell for some after death, but rather a way into a better life for all before death. His message was not about going to heaven after history, but about the [K]ingdom of heaven coming to earth in history. His goal – made clear in word and deed, day after day during his three years of public ministry – was not to constrict but rather to expand the dimensions of who could be welcomed into the [K]ingdom of God, of who could be accepted in the people of God. So [his] understanding of Jesus’ essential message tells [him] that ‘exclusivity of’ should generally precede ‘the Pharisees’ or ‘the judgmental’ or ‘the hypocrites,’ and never ‘Christ.’

Jesus, in McLaren’s opinion, came to announce the Kingdom’s arrival and not the eternal destinations of heaven and hell. McLaren rejects those interpretations of John 14:6 which suggest that Jesus is “in the way” of people connecting with God. Jesus’ purpose as the Way is simply to go before all humanity and “prepare a place” for them in the Kingdom of God. As the Truth, Jesus is trustworthy even while he offers no “information or instructions” and can only be known by McLaren subjectively. As the Life, Jesus is the Kingdom of God, which, according to McLaren, means that Christ “lived in an

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826 Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 201.


829 Ibid., 4.

830 Ibid., 8, 10.

831 Ibid., 9.
To arrive at his interpretation of John 14:6, McLaren attempts to understand its meaning to “original hearers” and the larger context of Christ’s teaching on God’s Kingdom which centers on His command to love God and love one’s neighbor. This leads him to reject the conservative evangelical position that one should “personally understand and believe a clearly-defined message about [Jesus] and personally and consciously ask [Him] to come into their heart.”

**Analysis of John 14:6 with Critical Commentary**

In his discussion of John 14:6, McLaren offers a timely warning, “One of the most basic and widely-accepted principles of biblical interpretation says that to interpret a text out of context is a pretext.” This section considers the context of John 14:6 and scholarly discussion on the verse in its context. According to George R. Beasley-Murray, emphasis in John 14:6 is on ‘the Way’ because the Apostle is referring back to John 14:4 and ends 14:6 with “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

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832 Ibid., 8.

833 McLaren, “A Reading of John 14:6,” 3-18; idem, “Rediscovering Christian Faith.” In this video, McLaren invites his audience to consider the meaning of the Kingdom of God in the minds of the original hearers.


‘the Life’ simply provide further explanation of how Jesus is ‘the Way’: “[H]e is the Way because [H]e is the truth, i.e., the revelation of God, and because the life of God resides in [H]im (in the context of the Gospel that includes life in creation and life in the new creation” (John 1:4, 12-13, 5:26).  

In John 14:2-3, Jesus speaks about the place where He is going, namely, the house of God. In verses 1 to 6, He indicates that He is the way to God’s house and besides His person there is no other way. As the personified way to God, Jesus is not simply showing His disciples the way to God or demonstrating to them how to take it, “[n]or is it adequate to say that Jesus ‘is the Way in the sense that [H]e is the whole background against which action must be performed, the atmosphere in which life must be ‘lived’ [because] that assigns Jesus far too passive a role.”

Bultmann, in his study of John 14:6, believes that John is not referring to redemption as a future eschatological event; rather, “the redemption is an event which takes place in human existence through the encounter with the Revealer.”

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McNeile, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 2:537. Carson, Haenchen, Godet, and Bernard agree with Beasley-Murray. Bernard connects Christ as ‘the way’ with OT passages where the Israelites were told not to turn from God’s way which was established in His written word and the Psalmist’s request for help in learning God’s way (Deut 5:32-33; 31:29; Is 3:21; 35:8; Ps 25:4; 27:11; 86:11). Then he points to Hebrews 9:8 which declares that the way to God was not fully made known before Christ. With Jesus’ arrival and His declaration that He is the Way to God in John 14:6, John is telling his audience about Christ’s uniqueness in that He is the exclusive way to God.

836 Beasley-Murray, John, 252.

837 Carson, The Gospel according to John, 491.

calls Jesus ‘the Truth,’ Bultmann believes that “truth does not exist as doctrine.”  

Leon Morris, however, argues that Jesus is the Truth in the sense that His gospel will show believers the way to Him; therefore, Jesus as ‘the Truth’ reveals the way to God through Him in such a way that “[n]o one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

John Chrysostom argues that Jesus is the Truth because His words bear no falsity and therefore His proclamation of Himself being the Way is trustworthy. Carson also connects Jesus as ‘the Truth’ with the gospel message: “Jesus is the truth, because He embodies the supreme revelation of God—He [H]imself ‘narrates’ God (1:18), says and does exclusively what the Father gives [H]im to say and do (5:19ff; 8:29), indeed [H]e is properly called ‘God’ (1:1, 18; 20:28).”  

As ‘the Life,’ Carson says that Jesus is “God’s gracious self-disclosure, [H]is ‘Word’ made flesh (1:14). Jesus is the life (1:4), the one who has ‘life in [H]imself,’ (5:26), ‘the resurrection and the life’ (11:25), [and] ‘the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).”

839 Ibid., 606-607.


842 Carson, The Gospel according to John, 491.

843 Ibid., 491.
Critical Response to Brian D. McLaren

Given that McLaren’s interpretation of John 14:6 clearly has its detractors, an assessment will be made of his hermeneutic in relation to his postmodern epistemology and the person of Christ. McLaren’s unwillingness to apply this verse to teachings on existence of heaven and hell followed his partially realized eschatology. The following critical response, however, is primarily concerned with the person of Christ in relation to God and believers based on an accurate interpretation of John 14:6. McLaren’s interpretation, by his own admission, is derived from two areas, the minds of the original recipients of Christ’s words and the larger context. This response will therefore begin with these two items followed by an in-depth analysis of McLaren’s interpretation.

Postmodern Hermeneutic

McLaren’s understanding is derived from the larger context, but the larger context that he chooses is somewhat selective. First, he chooses passages in John that promote a non-exclusive view of God to inform his interpretation before having critically examined the passage itself. McLaren may object and say that he was not trying to establish a scholarly critique of the passage. Even so, his interpretation, by his own admission, invalidates traditional interpretations which hold to an exclusive view; therefore, his interpretation requires significant hermeneutical study of supporting Scriptures to develop and prove his argument.

Given that McLaren fails to make an in-depth assessment of the immediate context of John 14:6, the range of meaning could still have been greatly reduced by considering the whole Gospel of John followed by the rest of Scripture. Since McLaren primarily chooses only those passages which present his non-exclusive view of God, his
interpretation of the passage becomes overly informed by his bias. McLaren readily admits bias, but in doing so, fails to address how his interpretation of the passage is more correct than those who disagree because he fails to examine John’s meaning based on the mindsets of the original audience:

Despite his lack of evidence, McLaren considers his bias to be well-informed based on the mindsets of the original audience:

One of the most basic and widely-accepted principles of biblical interpretation says that to interpret a text out of context is a pretext. In other words, if [one] pull[s] a verse out of its setting, [one] may unwittingly (or intentionally) twist it to make it say things it was never intended to say. Another way to say nearly the same thing: a statement should have made some degree of sense to its original hearers, so [one] should favor interpretations that would have come to mind for those who first heard that statement.  

This appeal to the minds of the original audience varies from the traditional historical-grammatical hermeneutic which examines archeological and historical evidence, grammatical and syntactical features, and contextual and canonical evidence. While McLaren certainly does not reject the importance of context to establish the meaning of the text, McLaren prefers interpretations that would have been conceivable to the audience and thus establishes a limitation on a meaning that may have surpassed the understanding of original hearers:

[One] need[s] to go back to the actual text, read carefully, and take the context very seriously – both the immediate context, and the larger context of Jesus’ life and mission. [One] to try to hear the words of this verse in the context of the conversation of which they are part. [One has] to refuse all interpretations that [one] could not imagine as part of Jesus’ communication process with his original conversation partners.

845 Ibid., 4.
McLaren’s understanding of the mindsets of original hearers may inform his interpretation of Scripture more than an in-depth historical-grammatical analysis. Such an analysis should lead one to make various conclusions about the meaning of Scripture which would in turn inform the meaning of a given text under consideration. Since McLaren’s epistemological views make it difficult for him to establish correct meaning, how can he know use such an analysis to inform his understanding of the original mindset.

McLaren’s approach does not align with Christ’s declaration to the disciples about the inability of the crowd to understand his parables: “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven’” (Mark 4:11-12). The lack of understanding among the original hearers is also supported by Isaiah and Paul (Isa 6:9-10; Acts 28:27; Rom 1:18-32; 3:11; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 4:18). In 1 Corinthians 2:12-14, Paul teaches that only the indwelling Spirit of God can make God’s Word understandable. Based on such evidence, the correct interpretation of Scripture comes from a person who is indwelled by the Spirit. Use of the historical-critical method should provide support to a valid interpretation even while the original audience may or may have not understood the meaning of Scripture.

At this point, one wonders how McLaren can know the minds of original hearers given their departure from earth approximately 2,000 years ago. Second, if McLaren knows their minds, it would follow that everyone else may be able to do so as well. Therefore, if McLaren’s interpretation is built on this basis, others scholars could
potentially choose the same basis and interpret the passage differently based on their understanding of the minds of original hearers. Clearly, such an approach for developing an interpretation is faulty because there is no objective basis from which to establish, with any degree of certainty, the mindsets of original hearers.

Another objection may be raised against McLaren’s hermeneutical approach to John 14:6. McLaren’s appeal to the mindsets of the original audience makes his appeal to context equally faulty. Given the previous argument against the use of the mindsets of the original audience, the subjectivity inherent in that approach allows any number of possible interpretations to arise from John 14:6 based on the interpreter’s understanding of original mindsets.

By appealing to original mindsets in conjunction with context, McLaren deprives the text of any meaning that can be derived from it apart from special knowledge of original mindsets which cannot possibly be obtained. This effectively renders Scripture, even John 14:6, completely useless because it cannot impart its meaning, if one is willing to assume it has meaning, to interpreters. McLaren’s appeal to wider context, therefore, is absurd because it would be a pointless task given that neither he nor anyone else, in his opinion, could ever hope to derive meaning from Scripture.

A fourth criticism may be applied to McLaren’s hermeneutic based on his understanding of epistemology. It has been well established already that McLaren believes in absolute truth but denies that people possess the ability to access it with certainty. One wonders why McLaren would appeal to the mindsets of original hearers and the wider context in his interpretation because neither hearers nor biblical authors would have been able to have any certainty about anything or anyone including the
person of Christ. Even if they did have certainty which McLaren’s postmodern epistemology expressly forbids, then they would not be able to help others access the same meaning because of epistemological constraints.

**Rejection of the Uncertain God**

McLaren has asserted postmodern epistemology as a philosophical foundation in his application of deconstruction to theology and Scripture. Despite inherent uncertainty within his philosophy, he has determined that Christ can be subjectively known but not objectively known. His uncertainty does not prevent him from making an objective conclusion that humanity cannot know any objective facts about God, His Son, or anything else. He is able to affirm original goodness in humanity as an intact reality despite the Genesis account of the first sin. Finally, McLaren claims to know the mystery spoken of by Jesus Christ to be the Kingdom of God.

These conclusions, which McLaren draws upon heavily to build his eschatology and inform his hermeneutic of John 14:6, are impossible given his epistemological stance. Moreover, these conclusions have significant implications on his Christology. Therefore, a critical assessment ought to be made about the relation of McLaren’s postmodern epistemology to Christ’s person, the very subject matter of John 14:6 which informs his interpretation of this verse. Orthodox Christianity has long held that Christ is fully God in the flesh and McLaren asserts his agreement. Since McLaren

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retains an orthodox view of Christ’s person and holds to a postmodern epistemology, an inevitable crisis results because Christ as fully man means that He would be incapable of having certainty about anything proclaimed and Christ as fully God would mean that He would have absolute certainty about everything unless one believes that even God is uncertain. McLaren, however, affirms God’s certainty because he believes that nothing can be concealed from God.  

To deal with the crisis sufficiently, four possible alternatives will be reviewed to synthesize McLaren’s epistemological position and his understanding of Christ and humanity: Christ is fully God and not fully human, Christ is fully human and not fully God, humans are all fully God, or God is fully human. McLaren clearly rejects the first and second alternatives based on his affirmation of Christ being fully God and fully man, but his position on the other two requires some elaboration.

The third position, humans are fully God, is also problematic for McLaren because of the existence of death, the need to be shown the way by Christ, and the need to trust God for the future. Humans cannot be fully God based on McLaren’s understanding of God as God of love who would never be party to an unjust deed. Humans, on the other hand, are constantly engaged in injustice and need to learn, according to McLaren, to work for the Kingdom through social action. Given human dependence on God, McLaren surely cannot believe that humanity is equivalent in nature to God. This leads one to ask for his position on the fourth alternative—God is fully human.

The orthodox view of the Incarnation allows Christ to be both fully God and fully human. Somehow, both natures can coexist allowing Christ to be without sin and still face death in the flesh. When McLaren asserts that “God is like Jesus,” does he mean that God is fully human, or does He mean that God is like Jesus in some other way? McLaren is saying that “compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, and love from beginning to end” are a part of Christ’s “life,” “way,” “deeds,” and “character,” rather than “exclusion, rejection, constriction, elitism, favoritism, and condemnation.”

If this is so, Christ’s humanity is consistent with characteristics associated with God’s grace and none of those associated with His wrath. Therefore, full humanity, or one might say the essence of humanity, possesses God’s graceful character, as articulated by McLaren, devoid of any wrath. McLaren’s view of humanity is consistent with his view of God as love and his denial of the doctrines of total depravity, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, election, and hell. Based on his understanding of God and His Son and denial of these doctrines, he is able to exalt humanity and declare God to possess qualities which he associates with the humanity of Jesus.

McLaren’s current position on the human qualities of God presents some truth declarations that require examination. First, on what basis does McLaren establish God’s character? It cannot be Scripture because he denies *sola scriptura*. It cannot be Church traditions because McLaren deconstructs all theologies. One wonders whether or not McLaren’s personal experience serves as his basis.

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849 McLaren, “A Reading of John 14:6,” 11. By knowing Christ’s human qualities, people, according to McLaren, can “know what God is like.”
Second, McLaren’s declaration that God possesses some human qualities of Jesus suggests that God might be capable of something other than grace. This possibility, however, is rejected by McLaren because he limits fully human qualities to those only consistent with a view of God is love. Once again, if McLaren’s understanding of God’s character and the nature of humanity proves faulty, a god who possesses human qualities may end up being wrathful. McLaren certainly rejects the second alternative as seen in his position on original sin, election, and hell.

This being the case, the four alternatives considered as possible solutions for McLaren, given his view Christ as fully human and fully God and his understanding of epistemology, end up failing to help solve McLaren’s Christological crisis which presents Christ and God as Beings lacking certainty. To reconcile the crisis, McLaren may need to change his views about Christ’s person if he desires to maintain his understanding of epistemology. He may choose to deny that Christ was fully human; otherwise, he will end up presenting God to be capable of wrath and uncertain about everything.

If McLaren chooses to say that Christ was not fully human, then the person and work of Christ have even less meaning than what McLaren currently presents. As of now, he views Christ as one who demonstrated the proper way to be human by engaging in social action and avoiding violence. Christ’s example, even in these matters, becomes somewhat meaningless if He is not human. If Christ is human and therefore uncertain about anything, then His actions on earth and any revelation that He may have imparted can bear no meaning because He, by default, would have been incapable of certainty. Therefore, His witness offers humanity no revelation of God’s character and ends up

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850 Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmeyer, A is for Abductive, 43.
being a complete absurdity. Furthermore, God’s uncertainty, made manifest in Christ as fully human, causes the very sending of His Son to a fallen and corrupt world (a world filled with injustice as McLaren understands it) to have been a pointless and potentially fruitless endeavor because He would not have known and still will not know whether or not Christ’s life and death had any meaning then or now.

This absurdity, which has been caused by McLaren’s postmodern epistemology, presents God as uncertain and, therefore, renders him capable of any action even actions considered wrathful. If McLaren wishes to avoid absurdity, he will need to accept that God is omniscient. If he still wishes to affirm Christ’s humanity and divinity in their fullness, he ought to consider Christ’s actions and words to have meaning. With such an affirmation, he will need to reconsider his understanding of epistemology and the capability of humanity to receive truth with certainty. This new found perception may allow him to reconsider the teachings of Scripture and come to more orthodox conclusions.

Chapter Summary

Incarnational theology, as propounded by conservative evangelicals, combines verbal proclamation of the gospel with Christlike actions. These occur in conjunction with Christian beliefs and arise from them as well. The performance of these Christlike actions do not in any way justify doctrines which Christians hold to be true; rather, they demonstrate that Christians believe in a particular way and in particular doctrines. By performing Christlike actions, Christians supplement their verbal gospel presentation with an obedient lifestyle that demonstrates Christ’s love for others.
This understanding of incarnational theology calls upon all Christians to avoid individualizing and privatizing their faith, a position which has been taken among some modernists. Instead, Christians ought to interpret their faith in light of their responsibility to other people. They should not relinquish sound doctrine; rather, they need to apply such doctrine to their lives and daily activities so that they will be incarnational witnesses. By engaging as an active witness that is obedient to Scripture, Christians will be faithful to Scripture and offer a living testimony that may prove effective among postmodernists who experience their Christlike actions.

In contrast to incarnational theology that is faithful to Scripture, McLaren offers an incarnational theology which gives primacy to action in evangelistic efforts. By applying his epistemological position to Scripture and theology, McLaren has been unable to restore truth declarations, such as the Four Spiritual Laws, to his approach to evangelism. At best, he is able to converse with potential converts about various truths, but he is prevented from making any exclusive claims as he presents the gospel. Without exclusive truth claims, evangelism within McLaren’s incarnational theology becomes conversations about truth and works done to bring justice to the world.

The absence of exclusive truth claims within McLaren’s incarnational theology leads him to de-emphasize verbal proclamation within his Kingdom of God theology. McLaren’s de-emphasis of verbal proclamation and corresponding preference for social action places him at odds with conservative evangelicals. These evangelicals affirm the necessity of verbal proclamation and social service within evangelism even while they hold differing opinions on the place of social action. In response, McLaren provides a
Kingdom of God theology which supports his postmodern epistemology and its denial of exclusive truths as being comprehensible to the human mind.

McLaren’s understanding of the Kingdom, which elevates social action and de-elevates verbal proclamation of the gospel, does not align with Christ’s actions in Matthew 15:22-24 and John 12:3-8. In these passages, Christ demonstrates that he places more importance on the mission assigned to Him by God than on this world’s problems. Christ even ascribes more importance to Himself than poor people. Evangelism, therefore, follows Christ’s lead and assigns priority to Him and proclamation of His gospel as opposed to the undoing of injustices within society.

Like Jesus, Paul was more interested in verbal proclamation of Christ’s gospel than becoming involved in social action. Paul’s writings and his many suffering for having proclaimed the gospel demonstrate his commitment to verbal proclamation. His lack of direct condemnation of slavery in his letter to Onesimus (Philemon) suggests that he was much less concerned with social injustice.

Since McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology and its overarching focus on social action as the central task of evangelism is clearly at odds with views of conservative evangelicals and lacks alignment with the teachings of Christ and Paul, this chapter has examined the Kingdom of God in Scripture and compared its findings with McLaren’s views about the Kingdom. In Scripture, God’s Kingdom is an entity that is completely under God’s sovereign control and human actions have no impact upon it apart from God’s will. In the present world, the Kingdom becomes an inwardly present reality within a believer’s inner being.
Many conservative evangelicals agree with McLaren that Christ’s central message was His proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Given the Kingdom’s mysterious nature even within the theology of conservative evangelicals, Christ’s teaching on God’s Kingdom has been compared with McLaren’s theology. Specifically, this chapter has examined in detail Christ’s meaning in Mark 4:11 when He spoke of the mystery of the Kingdom. In context, the mystery cannot be understood by humanity apart from God’s revelation. So that humanity might understand God’s mystery, God reveals Christ His Son to be the mystery of God’s Kingdom. While Christ spoke frequently about the Kingdom of God, His ultimate revelation is His person. Such a view of the mystery mentioned in Mark 4:11 aligns with many texts in the OT pointing to the Messiah, testimony of Gospel writers who focused on Christ’s life and works, Epistles which offer insight into the meaning and application of the OT and Christ’s words, and the eschatology of Christ’s future return in Revelation.

Since McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology posits mystery as a central tenet of Scripture, he fails to assign central importance to the person of Christ. His exaltation of mystery or secret knowledge may have some parallels with ancient Gnostic heresies. McLaren’s many books which develop his theological views demonstrate his knowledge of the mystery and his desire to share such knowledge with others. Even so, McLaren may be able to deny any such connection to these heresies by claiming no has access to secret knowledge, a claim which is clearly supported by his postmodern epistemology which views objective truth as ultimately incomprehensible.

This chapter has considered McLaren’s views of God’s Kingdom in relation to Christ’s person by examining his interpretation of John 14:6. While conservative
evangelicals use this verse to promote exclusivism, McLaren uses it to present Christ as a messenger who announces the arrival of God’s mysterious Kingdom. McLaren’s interpretation allows him to present Christ as Subjective Truth while presenting objective truth as incomprehensible. To respond to Christ’s message of Kingdom based on McLaren’s theology, one need not affirm any particular truth about Jesus. Conservative evangelicals, however, disagree with McLaren’s interpretation of John 14:6 and his understanding of the person of Christ in relation to God’s Kingdom.

In context, John 14:6 teaches that Christ is the sole way to God. Since McLaren rejects exclusive views of Christ due to postmodern epistemology, he develops an interpretation of John 14:6 which denies exclusivism by applying a postmodern hermeneutic. Within his hermeneutic, McLaren appeals to the minds of original hearers, but one wonders how McLaren can know what people thought over two millennia ago. McLaren’s appeal to a larger context to support his interpretation employs a selective hermeneutic guided by his argument against exclusivism and fails to make use of critical evidence provided in this chapter to support exclusivism.

McLaren’s postmodern epistemology has been analyzed in relation to his Kingdom of God theology which presents a non-exclusive view of Christ. Since McLaren’s views on Christ within his Kingdom theology are probably most contentious for conservative evangelicals, this chapter has considered McLaren’s epistemological views (the philosophical basis for his theology) in relation to his view on the person of Christ as fully God and fully man. The analysis proves that McLaren needs to reconsider his understanding of epistemology or his view of Christ to make his theology tenable. If he rejects his epistemological views, he should reconsider truth claims within Scripture
and see whether or not any of his views need to be changed. If he instead chooses to reject Christ as fully God and fully man, he will be aligning himself with the position taken by many heretics throughout Christian history.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Throughout his career as an author and a speaker, McLaren has received much criticism especially from conservative evangelicals. This study has attempted to be mindful of that criticism and McLaren’s responses to such criticism. After careful examination, McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology is his own interpretation of Christ’s original story:

Our versions (mine included) are all, then, human interpretations of the gospel of Christ and the apostles, and human interpretations of the original message are not exactly the same thing as the original message. Some are more true to the original and some less, but no articulation of the gospel today can presume to be exactly identical to the original meaning Christ and the apostles proclaimed. That doesn’t mean we can’t proclaim anything with confidence, but it demands a proper and humble confidence rather than a naive and excessive confidence.\(^\text{851}\)

McLaren has raised many questions regarding viability of previous interpretations of Scripture. Were these interpretations influenced by Greco-Roman culture? Were they somehow impacted by modern culture? Can any interpretation of Scripture be conclusive? His concern for the impact of contemporary culture on one’s hermeneutic is a valid concern that he shares with many conservative evangelicals. Even so, his use of postmodern culture to impact his hermeneutic leads him in syncretization of the gospel.

\(^{851}\)McLaren, “Will ‘Love Wins’ Win? We’re Early in the First Inning.”
McLaren’s desire to avoid “excessive confidence” in any given interpretation puts him in firm disagreement with evangelicals who believe that they can articulate the gospel’s meaning with full confidence. He has rejected the Four Spiritual Laws in favor of his Kingdom of God theology because his approach allows him to maintain his understanding of epistemology. Such an approach to God’s Word makes any interpretation of God’s Word valid if for no other reason than each interpretation is merely an attempt to access Christ’s original meaning, a task which McLaren believes is impossible.

Given his epistemological stance, McLaren is guided by one truth in particular: No truth concerning God or His Word can be known with certainty. The aforementioned truth, however, leads him to deconstruct any theology along with its corresponding biblical basis which promotes any exclusive truth claim. In his most recent book, his epistemological views even lead him to refer to God as “Mysterious Presence” and “Divine Mystery.”

Along with demonstrating the effects of McLaren’s understanding of epistemology on his theology, this research has documented McLaren’s denial of the doctrines of hell, election, original sin, salvation, sola fide, and sola scriptura. By denying orthodox versions of these doctrines, McLaren has been able to develop an ethical universalism and a participatory eschatology which includes all humanity in God’s restorative work within present creation. Close examination of McLaren’s understanding of these doctrines has demonstrated how he reshapes them to avoid being exclusive.

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After McLaren’s deconstruction leads to an absence of exclusive truth within his theology, he searches for and finds a new basis within Scripture to reconstruct his theology. That new basis is the Kingdom of God. It becomes the basis for his neoorthopraxy which portends to exalt orthopraxy even while it dismisses orthodoxy. Neoorthopraxy, as constructed by McLaren, affirms his postmodern epistemological views and his view of God as a loving and non-condemning Being. In addition, it calls on all people to engage in the restoration of God’s Kingdom in the world through social action to avoid and undo ill effects of injustice. Whereas orthodox Christians have found unity in their exclusive truth claims, McLaren offers unity in his postmodern epistemology, his benevolent view of God, and his call to social action.

The Thesis

This dissertation has presented a conservative evangelical critique of McLaren’s postmodern reconstruction of theology and its development of neoorthopraxy which emphasizes action and undermines orthodoxy. It has shown how McLaren’s postmodern epistemology leads him to deconstruct theology and Scripture in an effort to remove all exclusive truth claims. It has demonstrated how McLaren’s epistemological beliefs cause him to develop neoorthopraxy so that he can avoid reconstructing exclusive truth claims that formed classical orthodoxy. It has also traced McLaren’s development of Kingdom of God theology to support his neoorthopraxy and how his theology supports his understanding of epistemology and delivers a unifying call to all humanity to engage in social action.

A critical assessment of McLaren’s neoorthopraxy has been made that considers how his neoorthopraxy produces an unbiblical incarnational theology, an
evangelism that over-emphasizes social action, a non-biblical view of God’s Kingdom, and a non-orthodox view of the person of Christ. McLaren’s incarnational theology is unbiblical because of its affirmation of postmodern epistemology prevents it from making a verbal witness of exclusive truth claims within the gospel. This leads McLaren to focus his evangelistic efforts on calling all people to engage in social action without declaring exclusive truths from the gospel to them. McLaren’s Kingdom of God theology has been rejected because it shrouds the truth of God’s Word (revealed in Scripture) in mystery instead of emphasizing Christ (revealed in Scripture) as the center of God’s Kingdom.

Finally, this dissertation has proven that McLaren’s neoorthopraxy fails to present an orthodox view of Christ’s person. While McLaren claims that Christ is fully God and fully man, it has been shown that McLaren’s claim cannot be supported by his own epistemological basis. Hopefully, McLaren will consider the inconsistency and choose to maintain his orthodox view of the person of Christ at the expense of his postmodern epistemology.

Possible Future Research Topics

While this dissertation has focused solely on McLaren’s neoorthopraxy, the research process that led to its development has uncovered several research topics that may require further study. First, McLaren as well as other emergents are particularly concerned with various spiritual practices that they believe help their experience of Christianity. One may want to study how these practices relate to postmodernism and orthodox Christianity. Second, McLaren’s theology of God which presents God as loving and non-condemning may require further research. Scholars may benefit from a work
which demonstrates how McLaren supports his theology of God from Scripture and how this component of his theology affects the rest of his theology.

Other research topics discovered during the present work relate to other leaders within the Emerging Church. Since many of them are influenced by a postmodern epistemology similar to that of McLaren, a comparative study of these various leaders may demonstrate a connection and help scholars understand any differences that exist. While this study has focused on McLaren as the predominant leader within the Emerging Church, the influence of several other writers is expanding and the need to study their works is becoming more critical. Among these authors, Rob Bell, Doug Pagitt, and Peter Rollins may need further study.

Since McLaren represents the Emerging Church in America, further study may be required of the Emerging Church and its proponents in other nations. Comparative studies between different expressions of the Emerging Church throughout the world may provide critical insight into their views. Scholars may be further aided by research of individual churches themselves.

**Final Remarks**

The gospel of Jesus Christ has been impacting world cultures for two millennia. As God’s messengers have sought to contextualize the gospel in their respective cultures, some have over the centuries gone too far in their efforts to contextualize Christ’s message by syncretizing their beliefs with contemporary culture. McLaren replicated the same mistake as he sought to deconstruct and reconstruct theology based on a postmodern epistemological foundation. While this foundation may be a core tenet of postmodern culture, it is not a core tenet of Scripture. God who
authored Scripture was and is certain that His Word is true even while He allowed human authors to pen His Word.

Scripture testifies that these human authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit and the person of Christ as fully God and fully man suggests that all humans can be certain of the teachings revealed in God’s Word. Without such certainty, many possible interpretations arise. Some may develop a thoroughly postmodern view of God Himself which presents Him as a Being who is ultimately uncertain. Doing so, however, leads to a denial of both the Word of God and events to which it testifies. Those who choose to take such an approach should consider many historical validations which undergird the authenticity of Scripture and the events of Christ’s life to which it testifies.
APPENDIX 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE EMERGING CHURCH

Tony Jones, an emergent Christian, describes emergents as those Christians who are held together not by doctrine but by dissatisfaction with “modern American Christianity” due to their desire to be inclusive (open and non-judgmental) and their optimistic view of the future. Such inclusivism makes determining their doctrinal stances quite difficult especially since “there is no single theologian or spokesperson for the emergent conversation.” Having no authorized spokesperson, their conversational approach to Christian doctrines makes it difficult for students of the Emerging Church to ascertain their views on God, the Bible, and even the Church. This lack of doctrinal basis within the Emerging Church has led to the development of a new theology constructed on action and experience of emerging believers apart from foundational beliefs.

854 Tony Jones et al., “Our Response to Critics of Emergent.”
855 Tony Jones, “Introduction: Friendship, Faith, and Going Somewhere Together,” in An Emergent Manifesto of Hope: Key Leaders Offer an Inside Look, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 14-15. In his introduction to this book which has contributions from many emergent authors, Jones introduces them as friends in a conversation and the Bible is portrayed as “beautiful” when viewed holistically but in its parts, it becomes “disharmonious” and “contradictory.”
Mark Driscoll, a former emerging church leader, discusses the movement’s history from an insider’s perspective. He states that its roots are in the Leadership Network and included Pagitt, McLaren, Jones, and Kimball among others as members.\footnote{Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 87.}

Jones traces the beginning to 1997 when Pagitt was hired by the Leadership Network to gather leaders “to discuss ministry to Gen Xers.”\footnote{Jones, \textit{New Christians}, 42; McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” 36.} Eventually, this group broke from the Leadership Network and took the name Emergent.\footnote{Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 89.} Emergent, also known as Emergent Village, includes or has included Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Tim Keel, Karen Ward, Ivy Beckwith, McLaren, and Mark Oestreicher.\footnote{McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” 36.} Kimball has distanced himself from Emergent Village. From studying his published materials and online blogs, he is more conservative than members of Emergent Village.\footnote{Dan Kimball, “Emerging and Emergent Distinctions” (1 September 2008) [on-line]; accessed 1 October 2010; available from http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2008/09/emerging-and-em.html; Internet.} Together with McKnight, he has recently formed Origins.\footnote{Brandon O'Brien, “Emergent's Divergence: Leaders Hope Decentralizing Power Will Revitalize the Movement,” \textit{Christianity Today} 53 (January 2009): 14.}

As members in the Emerging Church, those within Emergent Village “endeavor to fund the theological imaginations and spiritual lives of all who consider themselves a part of this broader movement.”\footnote{“About Emergent Village” [on-line]; accessed 29 January 2011; available} Displaying a strong desire to disseminate
their message, Emergent Village has partnerships with three major publishers: Jossey-Bass, Abingdon Press, and Baker Books. Through these companies and a plethora of other mediums, members of Emergent Village and the Emerging Church have written at least several hundred books, countless articles, and ever-increasing number of blog entries. All of these writers are catering to the Emerging Church’s growing appeal over the last ten to fifteen years which may be due to numerical decline among many denominations according to John Drane. Given the pervasiveness of seeker-sensitive and seeker-driven ideas among Southern Baptist churches, DeVine is concerned about the allure of numerical growth may even attract these evangelical churches.

Discussing views within the Emerging Church requires, first and foremost, making a determination of what is the Emerging Church. Driscoll distinguishes between Emergent Village and the Emerging Church: “the [e]merging church is a broad category that encompasses a wide variety of churches and Christians who are seeking to be effective missionaries wherever they live” and bound together in a “missiological conversation about what a faithful church should believe and do to reach Western culture.”

According to Gibbs and Bolger, “[E]merging churches are missional


866 Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 89.
communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their time or place.\textsuperscript{867} This understanding, however, can be applied to many churches that seek to be biblically faithful within a postmodern context but do not see themselves as an Emerging Church.

Defining the Emerging Church presents a difficult challenge as McKnight observes,

The emergent conversation is difficult to categorize because it is focused on local expressions of the gospel tied to local culture. Depending on the environment, the neighborhood, the specific culture in which an emergent conversation begins will completely shape how that local expression of the gospel works out. So it can't be simply defined; it can't be simply categorized, and it's causing no end of frustration for people who would like to have tidier boxes.\textsuperscript{868}

Rollins agrees and adds that the diversity of perspectives among those participating in the emerging conversation makes describing it as a movement somewhat difficult.\textsuperscript{869} Even so, Larry D. Pettegrew believes the Emerging Church can be called a movement or simply a conversation because of the great diversity that exists despite the centralized goal of reaching the postmodern generation.\textsuperscript{870} Joshua M. Moritz prefers to call it a network with some prominent members and viewpoints with new contributions

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\textsuperscript{867} Gibbs and Bolger, \textit{Emerging Churches}, 28.
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\textsuperscript{869} Rollins, \textit{How (Not) to Speak of God}, 5.
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\textsuperscript{870} Larry D. Pettegrew, “Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church,” \textit{The Master’s Seminary Journal} 17 (2006): 165; McLaren, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” interview by Streett, 5. McLaren, in this interview, supports Pettegrew’s contention that the central purpose of the Emerging Church is to interact with the postmodern culture.
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constantly being made by others.\textsuperscript{871} Kimball prefers to call the Emerging Church “more of a mindset” that “something needs to change.”\textsuperscript{872}

Many within the Emerging Church prefer to describe their movement as a conversation and even some who have studied it agree.\textsuperscript{873} DeVine, however, believes the large amount of published material, online material, and churches devoted to the conversation requires the Emerging Church to be seen as a movement.\textsuperscript{874} Based on his studies of the written material associated with the Emerging Church, DeVine calls it a movement because he believes that hundreds of churches in America and Britain are involved including “the full range of Protestant denominations from Anglican to the Assemblies of God, from Lutheran to Baptist.”\textsuperscript{875} Slaughter and Bird observe that the Emerging Church embraces Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians, whether they are conservative or liberal, because all are united by their faith in Christ.\textsuperscript{876}


\textsuperscript{872} Dan Kimball, Emerging Church, 14-15; Dan Kimball, “Preaching in the Emerging Church: An Interview with Dan Kimball,” interview by Michael Duduit, \textit{Preaching} [on-line]; accessed 29 March 2011; available from http://www.preaching.com/resources/articles/11549470; Internet. In his interview with Duduit, Kimball explains that most emerging leaders are rethinking the church because of the numerical decline that many churches are facing.

\textsuperscript{873} McLaren, Pagitt, and Stetzer, “A Snapshot of the Emergent Church,” 4.

\textsuperscript{874} DeVine, “The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams,” 4.

\textsuperscript{875} DeVine, “The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists,” 27.

\textsuperscript{876} Slaughter and Bird, \textit{Unlearning Church}, 49.
According to DeWaay, those who attempt to study the theology of the Emerging Church will find that its members “hold diverse and even opposing positions on nearly every major Christian doctrine.”

Given this, Phil Johnson believes that diversity is the only possible description for theological positions within the ECM. McLaren, in his interview with Frost, says the “Movement is stronger in Latin America than North America. It is growing stronger in Europe and Africa.”

Eddie Gibbs, Ryan Bolger, F. LeRon Shults, and Kevin Ward add Australia, New Zealand, and Asia to the list of countries who are involved in the ECM.

McKnight calls the Emerging Church a protest movement because it protests hypocrisy in traditional churches, doctrinal divisions in the Church, absolute certainty, action separated from theologies, individualism, marketing the gospel, perceiving Church as ritual instead of way of life, hierarchal forms of church governance, preference for the “spiritual gospel” over “the social gospel,” and the Kingdom of God as merely a heavenly institution. These protests have generated many ongoing conversations but...
Driscoll expresses concerns that the lack of resolution on the missional topics among its participants will only lead to disunity and ineffectiveness.\(^\text{882}\)

In an effort to describe the ECM and help others understand the nature of it, Gibbs and Bolger offer this definition of emerging churches:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. The definition encompasses the nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.\(^\text{883}\)

Commenting on Gibbs and Bolger’s definition, DeVine says, “That the three core and six derivative emerging church indicators involve activities that reveal a strong suspicion of doctrine in favor of ethics, the prioritizing of orthopraxy above orthodoxy.”\(^\text{884}\) The emerging preference for orthopraxy, according to Stephen Hunt, is due to their view of actions and experiences as “personal and more relevant over propositional, evangelistic preaching, and exegetical Bible teaching, since these involve claims to an absolute ‘truth’.”\(^\text{885}\)

\(^{882}\)Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 92-93.

\(^{883}\)Gibbs and Bolger, Emerging Churches, 44-45.

\(^{884}\)DeVine, “The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists,” 30.

\(^{885}\)Hunt, “The Emerging Church and Its Discontents,” 289.
APPENDIX 2

THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Traditionally, evangelicals have believed that true faith is founded on the Word of God, the contents of which can be known with certainty. MacArthur offers a defense of the evangelical position on the doctrine of biblical clarity:

The doctrine of biblical clarity, the perspicuity of Scripture, pervades the pages of God's Word. Scripture describes itself as that which gives light (Ps 119:105; 2 Pet 1:19a), is profitable (2 Tim 3:16-17), explains salvation (2 Tim 3:15b), addresses common people (cf. Deut 6:4; Mark 12:37; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:1), can be understood by children (Deut 6:6-7; Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 3:14-15), and should be used to test the validity of religious ideas (Acts 17:11; cf. 2 Cor 10:5; 1 Thess 5:21-22). It is the truth (John 17:17) which sets men free (John 8:31-32).

Moreover, the Bible claims to be the very Word of God. Over 2,000 times in the OT alone, the assertion is made that God spoke what is written within its pages. From the beginning (Gen 1:3) to the end (Mal 4:3) and continually throughout, this is what OT Scripture asserts about itself.

The phrase "the Word of God" also occurs over 40 times in the NT. It is equated with the OT (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31; 6:2). It was the Word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the Word Paul preached on his first (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35, 36), second (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11), and third missionary journeys (Acts 19:10). It was what James commanded his readers to apply (Jas 1:22), and what Peter, John, and Jude condemned the false teachers for twisting and obscuring (cf. 2 Pet 3:16; 2 John 9; Jude 4). Both the OT prophets and NT apostles took the inspired writings of Scripture seriously, because they understood them to be the very Word of God.

What does all this have to do with biblical clarity? Simply this: In Scripture, the person of God and the Word of God are everywhere interrelated, so much so that whatever is true about the character of God is true about the nature of God's Word. Thus, to deny the clarity of Scripture is to call into question God's ability to communicate clearly. But by affirming the fact that the Bible's message is inherently
understandable, the doctrine of perspicuity rightly acknowledges that the Spirit of
God has revealed divine truth in a comprehensible form. 886

Not only can Scripture be clearly understood by humanity as the Word of God, it is also authoritative. Richard L. Mayhue offers this syllogism which he derives from Scripture: “1. Scripture is the Word of God. 2. The words of God are authoritative. Conclusion: Scripture is authoritative.” 887 McLaren, however, is unwilling to concede (at least with absolute certainty) that Scripture is the Word of God. 888 McLaren writes that one is not even able to understand with certainty the statement, “I exist and I love you,” even if it came from God. 889 Keel argues that Scripture cannot be reduced to specific principles that can be held with certainty because such a practice will neglect context. 890 Paul G. Hiebert admits the difficulty of extracting truth from the biblical context but adds that such an undertaking is vital if one is “to understand the gospel.” 891

In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul declares, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” While McLaren affirms


889 Ibid., 57.

890 Keel, Intuitive Leadership, 74.

the usefulness of Scripture in the tasks listed by Paul, he denies that it is authoritative.\textsuperscript{892}

Through his character Neo, McLaren distinguishes between authoritative text and the authority of the interpreter. By casting doubt in one’s ability to arrive at a correct meaning of text with any degree of certainty, McLaren teaches that the ultimate authority is God Himself and not the biblical text because only God knows His meaning which lies behind the text.\textsuperscript{893}

DeWaay calls this “postmodern approach . . . a system of thought [that] raise[s] the bar of human knowing to be deficient by that standard, and on that basis rejected the whole project.”\textsuperscript{894} Unfortunately, he does not address texts within Scripture which many conservative evangelicals use to prove its authority. The OT repeatedly declares that its contents are from God when it states, “This is what the Lord says” (cf. Ex 4:22; Deut 29:5; 1 Sam 2:27; 1 Kings 12:24; Ps 68:22; Isa. 3:16; Jer 15:19; Ezek 6:11; Amos 1:6; Micah 3:5; Nahum 1:12; Zech 1:16). Peter affirms that the biblical authors of the OT “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus and the disciples constantly reference the Scripture to support their arguments and actions. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul calls his teachings the word of God.

\textsuperscript{892} McLaren, \textit{New Kind of Christian}, 52.

\textsuperscript{893} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{894} DeWaay, \textit{The Emergent Church}, 140.
McLaren frequently mentions the usefulness of Scripture and his deep respect for it. With this in mind, McLaren announces, “The Bible” can be seen as “an inspired gift from God—a unique collection of literary artifacts that together support the telling of an amazing and essential story.” McLaren later develops his idea of the Bible being an inspired story: The Bible should be “read as an inspired library. This inspired library preserves, presents, and inspires an ongoing vigorous conversation with and about God, a living and vital civil argument into which [people] are all invited and through which God is revealed.” Instead of encountering propositional truths that are divinely inspired, Scripture as an inspired story means that “people can encounter God . . . in a story full of characters.” To support his position, McLaren argues that when Scripture is broken down into divisible parts, such as books and verses not to mention doctrines derived from its contents, the immediate context is neglected.

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898 Ibid., 95.

899 McLaren, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 44.
APPENDIX 4

REJECTION OF CARTESIAN FOUNDATIONALISM

In contrast to approaching Scripture with an inherent view, the modernist approach to Scripture, McLaren contends, was a search for answers and foundational truths.\(^{900}\) In his opinion, the modernist uses “objective analysis” in “a kind of aggressive conquest of the text—reducing it to something explainable by [their] preconceptions, turning it into moralisms or principles or outlines or conclusions or proofs.”\(^{901}\) In an earlier publication, McLaren was even clearer on his understanding of the type of fundamentalism embraced by modern Christians: Their “truth claims [are] presented as objective facts” and “abstract absolutes.”\(^{902}\)

According to Smith, McLaren is referring to Cartesian foundationalism (also known as classical foundationalism).\(^{903}\) This type of foundationalism requires an unreasonable standard of absolute certainty because anything that is to be called knowledge requires proof beyond all skepticism. Even if one admits the presence of some beliefs that are absolutely certain, building an entire noetic structure will require one to accept some beliefs that fail to meet demands of the Cartesian theory.


\(^{901}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{902}\) McLaren, “Honey, I Woke Up in a Different Universe!,” 41.

Smith points out that no philosopher advocates Cartesian foundationalism because “the certitude requirement is ridiculously high as a standard for having knowledge.”\textsuperscript{904} In its place, Moreland points out that most epistemologists have developed a modest foundationalism that attempts to avoid the Cartesian dilemma.\textsuperscript{905} Smith, for example, offers a modest foundationalism which understands knowledge as “justified true belief.”\textsuperscript{906} Knowledge, Smith contends, requires belief in propositions or propositions that are deemed by the person holding the belief to have “sufficient evidence.”\textsuperscript{907} Such an approach allows one to remain open to change one’s belief should subsequent knowledge demonstrate falsity in one’s belief. Conversely, it does not require absolute certainty just belief that a particular proposition resonates appropriately with one’s perspective of reality. By accepting modest foundationalism, conservative evangelicals avoid McLaren’s charge of Cartesian foundationalism and develop an approach to Scripture that affirm key interpretations in theological construction. Such a stance, however, will likely be rejected by postconservatives who maintain a postmodern epistemology like McLaren.

J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese offer “three theoretical commitments” that have led to this post-conservative response:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{904} Smith, \textit{Truth and the New Kind of Christian}, 113; Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn,” 83. Moreland also finds little support for Cartesian foundationalism among philosophers.

\textsuperscript{905} Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn,” 83.

\textsuperscript{906} Smith, \textit{Truth and the New Kind of Christian}, 115. Emphasis is his.

\textsuperscript{907} Ibid. Emphasis is his.
\end{quote}
(i) rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in favor of an epistemic or
deflationary theory of truth; (ii) rejection of metaphysical realism in favor of a
theory of socially or linguistically constructed reality; and (iii) rejection of the
referential theory of language in favor of a ‘semiotic theory’ in which linguistic
signs refer only to other signs and never to the world as it is. Moreland and DeWeese’s synopsis of post-conservative theories fits well with

McLaren’s understanding of epistemology. While McLaren is quite fond of objecting to
scientific approaches to reality, science itself, apart from its intrinsic denial of an ultimate
reality, seeks to study reality through observation and resulting documentation of facts
observed. A scientific approach to reality, therefore, is akin to the correspondence theory
of truth which was first relayed by Aristotle: “[H]e who says that a thing is or is not says
what is either true or false; but if the subject is a middle term between contradictories,
neither that which is nor that which is not is being said to be or not to be.” Aristotle is
simply stating one’s supposed statements of truth should match reality if they are to be
construed as true.

The correspondence theory of truth requires objective reality to validate all
truth proposals advocated by an individual or community. When applied to statements
concerning Christianity and its doctrines, it requires theological constructions to agree
with known reality as experienced by humanity, a requirement that is on par with that of

\[908\] J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, “The Premature Report of
Foundationism’s Demise,” in Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical
Accommodation in Postmodern Times, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and
Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 84. Concerning these theories which are
embraced by many postconservatives, the authors state that “all three commitments are
minority positions in contemporary analytic philosophy and the arguments to be found in
contemporary postconservative writings for these commitments . . . are rather uninformed
philosophically.”

\[909\] Aristotle, Aristotle’s Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and
science. Christians, who advocate biblical inspiration to affirm the correspondence theory of truth, assume Scripture makes divinely inspired objective and unquestionable statements about reality that trump even human experience that seemingly disagrees. Such an assumption, however, could be developed from a study of the Bible’s history so that believers will be provided a higher degree of certainty concerning its truthfulness.

These historical evidences, however, may not help convince someone like McLaren whose postmodern worldview denies any referent beyond experience. Perhaps this is why McLaren favors a coherence theory (an epistemic theory) which later develops a pragmatic theory (a deflationary theory). He does not, however, reject metaphysical realism because he affirms God’s existence, but at the same time, he provides no clarity for his belief since he holds reality to be a social construction.

In More Ready than You Realize, McLaren suggests that one cannot attain an unbiased position of neutrality from which to ascertain truth with any degree of certainty and should therefore turn to one’s community for help in truth discernment. Lacking certainty, McLaren moves toward a rejection of the referential theory of language, a third theoretical commitment put aside by post-conservatives, when he undermines it by expressing the “limitations of language when talking about God.” Since language is limited in its ability to make referential statements about God, McLaren turns to the community at large for ongoing dialogue to discuss that which ultimately cannot be known about God. Here, McLaren follows Grenz and Franke who believe “theological reflection” belongs “within the believing community” where Scripture serves as a

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910 McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 76-77, 94.

911 McLaren, Generous Orthodoxy, 151.
contributor (albeit primary) to theological conversation and the believing community simply “gathers around Jesus the Christ.”

By viewing Scripture as an authority in theological constructions instead of the authority, Grenz, like McLaren, decides to give primacy to the Holy Spirit. Such a view, at first, seems to have merit, but one wonders how one is supposed to recognize the Spirit’s guidance if one cannot discern particular truths within God’s Word, truths that will help Christians recognize and understand the Spirit’s directions. By making the Holy Spirit the primary authority in interpretation of Scripture, post-conservatives like McLaren are able to provide a subjective foundation that promotes an experiential hermeneutic and an ongoing search for truth.

\[912\] Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism, 48; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 214-15.

\[913\] Grenz, Renewing the Center, 215; McLaren, New Kind of Christian, 42; McLaren, Secret Message of Jesus, 72-73, 110.
APPENDIX 5

INHERENCY VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Ultimately, McLaren’s focus on mission in his discussion of the Bible’s inspiration may be due to his rejection of Scripture as the ‘Word of God’:

To say that the Word (the message, meaning, or revelation) of God is in the biblical text, then, does not mean that [one] can extract verses or statements from the text and call them ‘God’s words.’ It means that if [people] enter the text together and feel the flow of its arguments, get stuck in its points of tension, and struggle with its unfolding plot in all its twists and turns, God’s revelation can happen to [them].

McLaren states emphatically that he “believe[s] that the Word of God is inerrant,” but then he adds, “the Bible is [not] absolutely equivalent to the phrase ‘the Word of God’ as used in the Bible.” This being the case, he prefers to describe his view of Scripture as inherency meaning “God’s inerrant Word is inherent in the Bible, which makes it an irreplaceable, essential treasure for the church, deserving [Christian’s] wholehearted study and respect, so [they] can be equipped to do God’s work.”

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915 McLaren, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 111; McLaren “Q & A: Vicious Blogs and Doctrine.” When questioned further about his view on inerrancy, McLaren, on his blog, “prefer[s] to use words the Bible uses to describe the Bible’s authority. ‘Inerrancy’ isn’t a word used in the Bible about the Bible. It is a word that derives its meaning from a modern Western school of philosophy called ‘foundationalism.’ Since I don’t feel bound as a Christian to define my faith in terms of a school of Western philosophy, I don’t use the word inerrancy, although I respect those who like to use it. I believe that the Word of God comes to us truly through the Bible, and especially in Jesus, to whom it bears witness.”

916 McLaren, *Last Word and the Word after that*, 111.
While conservative evangelicals support the call upon all Christians to engage in God’s work, they will likely require more than just respect in regard to God’s Word as propounded by the inherency view of Scripture. Wells, for instance, argues that performance of God’s work requires more than McLaren’s inherency view of Scripture:

Anything that does not arise from Christ’s saving death as interpreted by Scripture, that does not promote Christ’s glory as understood by the [A]postles’ teaching, that does not bear the stamp of [H]is grace as seen in obedience to [H]is Word, love of [H]is gospel, commitment to [H]is church, and service of others cannot rightly be characterized as the work of God.917

McLaren admits the influence of Brueggemann who outlines the meaning of inherency: 1) God is a loving creator and Redeemer who will restore the world; 2) Beyond these affirmations, inherency does not concern itself with any potential doctrinal distinctions; 3) Scripture is fallible due to its human authorship; 4) The human authorship allows for the possibility of generating new and improved interpretations.918 This view of Scripture, proffered by Brueggemann and followed by McLaren, is akin to Barth’s neoorthodox approach: “The Bible is God’s Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it.”919 Grenz, like Barth, denies Scripture as the Word of God

917 David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 183-84.


919 Barth, CD, 1, pt. 1.123.
in favor of viewing it more functionally as words of human authors to other humans through which God reveals Himself.\textsuperscript{920}

By affirming inherency, McLaren places himself firmly outside of the evangelical camp because inherency denies the evangelical view that Scripture is the inerrant Word of God and, therefore, authoritative in all its contents. This view, which is supported by the Evangelical Theological Society, is outlined at length in the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” which warns “that to deny [inerrancy] is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word that marks true Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{921}

McLaren believes Scripture is a joint creation of both God and various human authors who came from different cultures and, in his opinion, “[o]ne doesn’t decrease the other.”\textsuperscript{922} Since Scripture is partly a human creation, its precise meaning, in McLaren’s view, is further clouded by the culture within which the Scripture was written and the genre employed by its authors.\textsuperscript{923} To uncover its meaning, McLaren believes one needs to understand its meaning to “original hearers” so that its meaning will not be subjugated to the demands of contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{924}

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\textsuperscript{920} Grenz, \textit{Revisioning Evangelical Theology}, 130-34.
\textsuperscript{922} McLaren, \textit{Generous Orthodoxy}, 162.
\textsuperscript{923} McLaren, \textit{Finding Faith}, 241.
\textsuperscript{924} McLaren, \textit{Finding Faith}, 241; McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 78.
\end{flushright}
Assuming the lack of divine authorship while embracing a postmodern epistemology and an inherency view of Scripture, McLaren believes Scripture cannot “provide certainty” because no one can know for sure that it is indeed God’s Word in any of its contents; rather, those who proclaim the Bible to be God’s Word do so by faith (that is, relative certainty). McLaren, *Finding Faith*, 47, 56. Further certainty in viewing the Bible as God’s word erodes when McLaren questions whether or not certain parts of it, like those which condone stoning for disobeying parents and the killing of infants, are to be understood as God’s words. McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 49.

Instead of viewing Scripture as God’s Word, the contents of the Bible, in his mind, are imbued with divine meaning; however, any interpretation of its contents remains suspect. McLaren seeks to retain the Bible’s place as a repository for the Christian faith even while maintaining that humanity is trapped in their contemporary contexts and, therefore, are unable to hear God accept through fallible human language. In fairness to McLaren, Strauss admits that context shapes one’s interpretation of Scripture, but then he places exegesis before theological constructions so interpreters, who admit their bias, can allow Scripture to inform and transform their understanding. Strauss, “The Role of Context in Shaping Theology,” 112, 122.
APPENDIX 6
EXEGESIS OF JAMES 2:14-26

Verse 14

The theme of James 2:14-26 is that worldly faith is a heartless, intellectual faith, whereas true faith leads to godly behavior and decisive action. Wayne Grudem states James’ theme another way: “mere intellectual agreement with the gospel is a ‘faith’ that is really no faith at all.”929 Verse 14 begins this passage by stating the topic: the authenticity of faith without works. James then asks two rhetorical questions and uses μὴ which indicates that the answer to the second question is negative (cf. Matt 26:25; John 6:67).930 If the answer to the second question were positive, James would have used οὐ instead of μὴ. If the answer to the second question is negative, then a deedless faith has no saving power.

James uses questions and previous argumentation to outline his concern for those who express their faith in their words but not in their actions. The second question in verse 14 provides James’ thesis, namely that faith that is not active is useless and devoid of saving power. While some argue that James’ second question seems to deny the saving power of faith, Nigel Turner notes that the ἡ before πίστις is an individualizing


article which points back to the same word in the first question of v. 14. James is referring to a deedless faith as seen in the first question as opposed to a saving faith. Additionally, the imaginary person that James puts forth in his first question only says that he has faith. James’ argument discusses a person who claims to have faith, not necessarily a person who has faith. James’ claim is now clear: A person with a deedless faith is a person with no faith at all. Peter H. Davids states James’ argument very emphatically: “There is no salvation for the person who stops short of discipleship.”

**Verses 15-16**

To answer his second question of v. 14, James sets forth in v. 15 a scenario where a fellow Christian (ἀδελφὸς ἢ ἀδελφή) is in need of basic necessities (James 2:15). The presence of ἐὰν indicates that this is a future supposition. The scenario continues to unfold in v. 16 when another member of the local Christian community sees a fellow Christian in need and simply wishes him well while doing nothing to alleviate his suffering. Ralph Martin notes that the member’s wishful remark which uses an imperative verb is similar to a “wish-prayer.” James then asks another rhetorical question with an implied negative.

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931 Ibid., 173.


934 In sentences where either the masculine or the feminine pronoun is acceptable, the masculine pronoun will be used.

935 Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48 (Waco: Word,
Verse 17

While prayerful words spoken by the Samaritan in v. 16 had an appearance of saintliness, the words were not backed up with obedient action in keeping with God’s commands as James’ second question implies. As James states in 2:17, οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχῃ ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστιν καθ’ ἑαυτὴν. James argues that faith and works are not independent of one another. True faith, though independent of right action in relation to salvation, is expressed outwardly through right action in the life of the believer. Faith that is not accompanied by deeds is not Christian faith, according to James.

Verse 18

In v. 18, James begins a hypothetical dialogue with an imaginary person who opposes his argument and maintains that authentic faith does not require action. The objection of the imaginary person is noted by the presence of Ἀλλ. Some writers suggest that Ἀλλ ἐρεῖ τις identifies the imaginary person as an ally rather than an objector. Donald Verseput rejects this conclusion due to the “trenchant statement of the author’s thesis in vv. 14-17.” The imaginary person separates faith and deeds, whereas James combines both. James’ response to this opposing view is a request for proof that deedless faith is authentic. Obviously, a person with a deedless faith cannot prove the


reality of his faith since there is no outward manifestation of it. James then states that he will demonstrate his faith through action. Such a demonstration of faith, however, requires existence of faith before any demonstration of it.

Verse 19

James continues his argument with the person by first affirming his questioner’s belief in one God. He immediately follows by saying that demons believe in one God as well. Such a comparison has the effect of equating deedless faith with the pseudo-faith of demons. The pseudo-faith of demons is an intellectual acknowledgement that is by no means heartfelt. James also states that the pseudo-faith of demons leads them to tremble with fear, whereas James’ faith leads to obedient action.

Verse 20

James rebukes the imaginative objector by calling him foolish (κενέ) in v 20. Davids notes that a fool is one who has moral deficiencies more so than intellectual problems. His usage of ὧ in the rebuke, ὧ ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπος ἀργή κενέ, “suggests deep emotion” and betrays James’ passion for the objector’s need for authentic faith. By calling the imaginary objector foolish, James denounces his or her argument that faith can be present even if works are absent. The term ἄργη, used by James to modify a deedless faith, means “unproductive, useless, worthless.” James asks the question in 2:20:


θέλεις δὲ γνῶναι . . . ὅτι ἡ πίστις χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων ἀργή ἐστιν? This question introduces the following evidence in 2:21-25 which supports an affirmative answer.

**Verse 21**

In v. 21, James answers the question in v. 20 with illustrations from the OT. The first illustration is the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. James asks rhetorically whether or not Abraham was οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη when he obeyed God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. The implied answer to James’ question is positive as evidenced by the presence of οὖκ. \(^{941}\) At first glance, James’ assertion that Abraham is justified by works seems to go directly against Paul’s *sola fide* doctrine. The context, however, will reveal that James’ assertion is in agreement with Paul’s *sola fide* doctrine.

**Verses 22-23**

In v. 22, James continues to argue that Abraham’s faith was real because it was backed by measurable action. Most scholars define τελειόω, used to identify the effect of works on faith, as meaning to complete or fulfill. \(^{942}\) James uses τελειόω to declare that faith is completed by works. Genesis 15:6 is cited in v. 23 as further proof that Abraham’s faith was both active and obedient. James adds that Abraham, because of his


obedience, was called φίλος θεοῦ. Curiously, James notes that Abraham was called φίλος a friend of God. James 4:4 equates friendship with the world with hatred of God. By switching this verse around, one learns that friendship with God, like that which Abraham enjoyed, means hatred of the world and leads to right action as opposed to wrong action. From James 1:22-27, one learns that anything less than complete obedience is unacceptable. Tim Laato and Mark Seifrid add that real love (apart from which friendship would not exist) leads to “a complete work (1:4) as a fulfillment of the perfect law (1:25).”

Verse 24

James summarizes in v. 24 that ἐξ ἔργων δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως μόνον. James’ statement seems to place him directly in contradiction to Paul who said in Romans 3:28: δικαιοῦσθαι ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου. Paul, however, was concerned about legalistic righteousness (ἔργων νόμου). James is focused on Abraham’s obedient faith. Previously, James’ use of πίστις refers to the intellectual faith of demons and the imaginary objector in the hypothetical argument. While James separates faith and works in his discussion with the objector and his statement about demons, his end goal is to recombine them into a single unit.

Verse 25

James’ second illustration from the OT begins in v. 25 and portrays Rahab, a prostitute, as possessing the same kind of obedient faith that Abraham had when she

chose to assist Jewish spies. James, however, does not explicitly refer to Rahab’s faith; instead, he chooses to emphasize her works. Context clarifies, however, that the biblical author was referring to works that originated from faith. A. T. Robertson notes the irony of James choosing Rahab, a prostitute, as his second example to support his thesis that faith without works is dead. But James’ use of a woman marred by a sinful past demonstrates James’ emphasis on works as acts of charity rather than ritualistic activities.

Verse 26

James draws his argument to a conclusion in v. 26 as evidenced by his use of οὔτως. With finality, he says that η πίστις χωρὶς έργων νεκρά, ἐστιν. Deedless faith is empty and hollow like a body without a spirit. It is devoid of life and meaning. He compares the closeness of the union between faith and works with the union of body and spirit. To possess life, one must have both a body and a spirit. In the same way, faith and works must be united in the life of a person; otherwise, his faith is really no faith at all.

APPENDIX 7

SOLA FIDE IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

Burke and Taylor attempt to redefine faith by distinguishing between faith and belief: “Salvation involves faith, not belief” because belief requires knowledge of particular truths, faith merely requires “the experience of grace.” Slaughter and Bird also separate faith from belief because they seem to believe that right beliefs do not lead to salvation. In response, Wittmer argues, “Faith requires knowledge, for [one] cannot believe in what [one] do[es] not know.” In James 2:19, the Apostle confirms that demons possessed right belief and yet did not have saving faith. His argument, however, should not lead one to conclude that right belief is not necessary for salvation. The distinction between faith and belief among some emerging writers appears to be due to their association of reason with belief and action with faith: “The Reformation paradigm,


946 Slaughter and Bird, *Unlearning Church*, 105. They also say that faith “requires obedient action” which, on the surface, is the same argument made by James. However, their argument for the existence of faith apart from right beliefs would seem to make obedient action unattainable since one would have no way of confirming what truths should be obeyed.

947 Wittmer, *Don’t Stop Believing*, 40.
which tempts [one] to replace relationship with reason, is captured in the word belief. It is concerned with right thinking,” right doctrines, and right theology.  

Sweet defines faith as “a quest for discovery. It is nothing less than the pursuit of the GodLife relationship. Faith is kinetic and transformational. It is described in Scripture as following, forgiving, seeking, rejoicing, [and] sharing. It is the life of relating to God, to others, and to God’s creation.” In response, McKnight suggests the combination of theology (right beliefs) with right actions whereby actions are determined, guided, and advocated if not demanded by theology. Sweet does not deny the importance of right thoughts (those founded on Scripture), even so he argues for primacy of right relationships: “Right relationships are not produced by right thoughts or right actions. Just the opposite. Right thoughts and right actions are produced by right relationships.”

While few evangelicals will deny the importance of right relationships, they will likely disagree with Sweet because they may say right relationships require knowledge and application of Scripture to one’s relationships. This process, contrary to what Sweet states, requires diligent thinking about the biblical message. Moreover, right relationship begins with having a right relationship with God. Such a relationship, 

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949 Ibid.


951 Sweet, Out of the Question, 31.
according to Paul, requires preaching of the gospel and presumably those hearing it understand or think through the gospel presentation (Rom 10:14-15).

Toby Jones believes that Christ, unlike Paul, was more concerned with active faith than purity of doctrine.\textsuperscript{952} Commenting on James 2:26, Rollins believes active faith propounded by James to be faith that is defined exclusively by its actions and not by any particular truth statements.\textsuperscript{953} McKnight also notes James’ emphasis on works but argues that “James is [simply] in conversation with Paul.”

Commenting on active faith promoted by James 1:21-27, Frost and Hirsch assert Scripture teaches that knowledge is derived from and disseminated through experience: “Theoretical knowledge of spiritual truth is never commended in Scripture. In fact, . . . it is explicitly discouraged and condemned . . . [T]he understanding of Christian knowledge is indissolubly linked to experience. The follower of Jesus broadens his or her knowledge through experience or action, and his or her knowledge is to be expressed as experience or action.”\textsuperscript{954} Paul, like James however, advocates active obedience and connects this obedience with knowledge of the Law, the teaching of Christ, and the apostolic instructions (Rom 2:13; 6:17; 2 Thess 1:8; 3:14). Toby Jones calls for the application of Scripture to one’s activities as certainly biblical, but he gives little importance to the teaching of doctrinal truths. While one may agree that these truths need to be applied, they nonetheless ought to be taught and understood.

\textsuperscript{952}Jones, \textit{Way of Jesus}, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{953}Rollins, \textit{Fidelity of Betrayal}, 172.

\textsuperscript{954}Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, \textit{ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church} (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 153.
Rollins argues that true orthodoxy arises from the hermeneutic of love and is, therefore, synonymous with orthopraxy.\textsuperscript{955} In other words, those Christians who practice their beliefs (which arise from reading Scripture with a hermeneutic of love) by loving others will be living out their faith correctly. While reading and understanding the Bible from the vantage point of love for God and others seems biblical, one should be careful to allow the Bible to define the parameters of love and its application to the Word itself, to Christians, and to others. Pagitt, however, warns against isolating biblical parameters of truth and argues that Christians should “immerse [themselves] in the Christian way of living.”\textsuperscript{956} By living out one’s faith within Christian community, according to Pagitt, one can become Christian more thoroughly even while one can never claim to understand fully any of its tenets.

\textsuperscript{955}Rollins, \textit{How (Not) to Speak of God}, 70.

\textsuperscript{956}Pagitt and the Solomon’s Porch Community, \textit{Church Re-Imagined}, 25.
For McLaren, the evangelical goal of conversion “is inconsistent with a relationship” because it focuses on a momentary decision instead of a lifelong process.  

Hollis L. Green agrees that the salvation process is more than “signing a card, being baptized, joining a church or shaking hands with the preacher.” On the other hand, Hesselgrave points out that salvation does involve a “spiritual decision making process” and failure to fully understand this will only lead to syncretism.  

Barth notes that there is no evidence within the Gospels that Christ’s disciples obeyed Him after a series of steps, namely, a confession, a decision to obey, and finally actual obedience. Instead, the Gospels account for only one step: Jesus voiced a command, and those who believed obeyed. The disciples would not have believed if they had not followed Christ when he had commanded them. Why else would they have left all and followed Jesus?  

In disagreement with Barth, McLaren prefers to use the term “disciple-making” in place of “evangelism” because evangelism, in his view, focuses on that one  

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957 McLaren, More Ready than You Realize, 29


959 Hesselgrave, “Syncretism,” 90-91. To avoid this syncretism, he tells his readers to in-depth studies of “the biblical theology of conversion.”

960 Karl Barth, The Call to Discipleship (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958; reprint,
time event of conversion whereas disciple-making allows conversion to be seen as an ongoing process.\textsuperscript{961} W. Charles Arn agrees that evangelism in the modern era too often ended in “inhibiting the fulfillment of the Great Commission” because evangelism, as it was commonly understood, referred to the process of leading one to make a decision for Christ, whereas discipleship refers to a process of active change in the believer’s lifestyle.\textsuperscript{962} In a similar vein, George W. Peters argues that churches “evangelize, make converts and church members, but fail to make disciples.”\textsuperscript{963} In Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus’ main directive is to make disciples (\(\mu\alpha\theta\iota\varepsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\epsilon\) is the main verb of Matt 28:19). \(\Pi\rho\rho\varepsilon\upsilon\theta\varepsilon\upsilon\tau\varepsilon\zeta, \beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\zeta\omicron\nu\tau\varepsilon\varsigma, \) and \(\delta\iota\delta\acute{\alpha}\kappa\omicron\nu\tau\varepsilon\varsigma\) modify \(\mu\alpha\theta\iota\varepsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\epsilon\). McIlwain notes that “the end product is to be disciples—not ‘decisions’ or ‘converts’ or ‘believers’ or ‘acceptors’.”\textsuperscript{964}

“Disciple,” in singular form, occurs twenty-four times in the Gospels. It always refers to someone who had chosen to follow Christ and had demonstrated that choice through some form of action. In John 6:66, “disciple” refers to those who had followed Jesus for a time, but then turned back. John 6:64 reveals that those disciples who turned

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003 ), 17.

\textsuperscript{961}McLaren, \textit{More Ready than You Realize}, 161.


\textsuperscript{963}Peters, \textit{A Biblical Theology of Missions}, 184.

back and no longer followed Jesus did not believe. With this in mind, an authentic
disciple possesses both an active faith and an active commitment.965

Jesus says clearly in Luke 9:23-24 that those who choose to follow Him must
take up their crosses and even lose their lives. Self-surrender, therefore, is indicative of
the Christian’s relating to Jesus as Lord and not simply Savior. In Luke 14:27, Jesus says
that one must follow (ἀκολουθέω) Him to be His disciple. Ἀκολουθέω means to follow
after someone who is leading through compliance and obedience to his or her
commands.966 Gerhard Kittel notes that ἀκολουθέω does not refer to imitations of
Christ’s actions but to “fellowship of life and suffering with the Messiah.”967 Therefore,
disciples are those who actively follow Christ through their obedience to His commands
in Scripture.

Special revelation of God in Scriptures was communicated through human
agents. In the same way, the missionary is a human agent who spreads the message
across the world so that people may hear the gospel, receive it, and then mature in their
faith. While the missionary is a divinely ordained component in persuading potential

965 While all believers should possess an active faith and an active commitment, it is clear from Scripture that believers can at times struggle in their faith. Peter and the original disciples abandoned Jesus in the days leading up to his crucifixion. Paul repeatedly corrects and rebukes various Christian communities in his letters. In Revelation 2-3, John reveals the Lord’s criticism of some churches. Clearly, the believer can struggle in his faith; however, an authentic Christian has been given the precious gift of faith by God that can never be taken away. That faith is active in the life of the believer to help develop an active commitment.

966 BAGD, s.v. “ἀκολουθέω.”; Liddell-Scott, s.v. “ἀκολουθέω.”

converts and helping them mature, Hesselgrave points out the Holy Spirit takes the missionary’s message and “makes it understandable and operative in the hearer.”

Hesselgrave is supported by both Paul and Peter who declare that the Holy Spirit is the one who inspired every word written in Scripture (Eph 3:4-5; 2 Pet 1:20-21).

God’s Spirit inspired Scripture to aid “believers [in] their spiritual understanding and growth” (2 Tim 3:16-17). In John 16:13, Christ tells His disciples that the Holy Spirit, when He comes, “will guide [them] into all truth.”

After Pentecost, one notices that Peter immediately understands Christ’s message and ministry.

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969 Paul W. Newman, “The Word Proceeds from the Spirit,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1991): 119-20; Amos Yong, “A P(new)matological Paradigm for Christian Mission in a Religiously Plural World,” *Missiology* 33 (2005): 175-191. Noting that the Word of God comes from the Holy Spirit to humans, Newman encourages “dialogue with people of other faith-traditions with genuine openness to discover what the Holy Spirit has said and done in them.” While a detailed response to this article is not possible at this time, Newman does neglect to deal with the immutability of God and His Word, the Bible’s claim to be divine revelation, God’s unique plan through Israel, and the role of human messenger in declaring God’s message. Newman’s pneumatological theology is one example of several attempts to deal with the problem of religious pluralism while at the same time maintaining the uniqueness of Christ without diminishing God’s expression of Himself in other religions. Yong discusses various pneumatological theologies of religions, their implications, and arguments posed by critics.


971 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 643. Other Scriptures testify to the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (Rom 8:5, 14; Gal 5:16-18). In Galatians 5:16-26, Paul differentiates between the desires of the flesh and those of the Holy Spirit suggesting that Christians are to respond to the Holy Spirit’s desires as opposed to their fleshly desires. The desires placed within the believer and the Spirit’s active leadership of the believer show that the Holy Spirit participates in the life of each believer.
and becomes empowered to preach effectively. In 1 Corinthians 2:12-16, Paul comforts believers by telling them that they have received the Holy Spirit, which he calls “the mind of Christ,” who is from God who teaches them and empowers them to understand God’s Word.

Some debate exists over whether or not the Holy Spirit was to teach additional things to the disciples or simply help them develop a deeper understanding of the revelation already present. While the Apostles provide no new information that is contradictory to Christ’s revelation, they do offer a deeper understanding that has a sense of newness even if their words are grounded in the OT and the Gospel accounts. Paul testifies to Holy Spirit’s ability to search “the deep things of God” which had enabled him to understand the Holy Spirit’s counsel and even speak the Holy Spirit’s words in his Gospel presentation (1 Cor 2:9-16).

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