

## Emergent Church Movement

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### What are the Emergent Church's '95 Theses'?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

The Emergent Church movement promotes itself as a "new Reformation" with its own "95 theses" in a book by Emergent guru Brian McLaren. Despite their claims of charting the way forward for the church, the architects of this theological Tower of Babel are bent on taking the church back into pre-Reformation darkness.

Part one of a series.

Since the turn of the new millennium, the Emergent Church movement has been grabbing headlines as the darling of the religious media. Its influence has spread like wildfire in mainline liberal, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic seminaries alike.

#### A New Luther?

In 2004, Emergent Church guru<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren published what was hailed as a landmark book called *A Generous Orthodoxy*.<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Tickle, who according to her website is "a lay eucharistic minister and lector in the Episcopal church,"<sup>3</sup> wrote the foreword, in which she said:

Religion is like a spyglass through which we look to determine our course, our place in the order of things, and to sight that toward where we are going. On a clear day, no sailor needs such help, save for passing views of a far shore. But on a stormy sea, with all landmarks hidden in obscuring clouds, the spyglass becomes the instrument of hope, the one thing on board that, held to the eye long enough, will find the break in the clouds and discover once more the currents and shores of safe passage. Ours are stormy seas just now; and I believe as surely as Martin Luther held the spyglass for sixteenth-century Europe, so Brian McLaren holds it here for us in the twenty-first....

...The emerging church has the potential of being to North American Christianity what Reformation Protestantism was to European Christianity. And I am sure that the generous orthodoxy defined in the following pages is our 95 theses. Both are strong statements, strongly stated and, believe me, not lightly taken in so public a forum as this. All I can add to them in defense is the far simpler statement: Here I stand.

So, on that basis, the one thing that remains is to invite you to join thousands and thousands of others who have already read these words and subsequently assumed them as the theses of a new kind of Christianity and the foundational principles for a new Beloved Community.<sup>4</sup>

### **A "Beloved Community"?**

The "Beloved Community" of which Tickle speaks is a term coined by pseudo-Christian philosopher Josiah Royce (1855-1916). In his 1913 book, *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce said that the doctrine of the incarnation is not about the coming of God in the person of Jesus Christ, but the incarnation of God in the visible church. He added that "the visible church, rather than the person of the founder [Jesus Christ], ought to be viewed as the central idea of Christianity." To Royce, the "problem of Christianity" was Jesus Christ.

Royce also said that the visible church forms a "Universal Community of Interpretation" that redefines "Christianity" to suit the conditions of the times. Tellingly, Royce's book was recently republished by the Catholic University of America, an institution of the greatest chameleon-church on earth.<sup>5</sup>

### **Confused and Proud of It**

McLaren is clearly comfortable in the company of people like Tickle and Royce. The full title of McLaren's "95 theses of the Emergent Church" is quite a mouthful:

**A Generous Orthodoxy:** Why I Am a Missional — Evangelical — Post-Protestant — Liberal/Conservative — Mystical/Poetic — Biblical — Charismatic/Contemplative — Fundamentalist/Calvinist — Anabaptist/Anglican — Methodist — Catholic — Green — Incarnational — Depressed-Yet-Hopeful — Emergent — Unfinished Christian

Rather than being ashamed of his confused state of mind, McLaren wears this complex and contradictory title proudly, and uses each of the descriptions in the lengthy title of his book as the title of a chapter within it. McLaren presents himself as the guru of a "new Reformation" built not on orthodoxy, but on what another Emergent spokesman has called "orthoparadoxy".

A followup 2007 book, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, authored by McLaren and twenty-six other Emergent thought leaders, is an equally confused and confusing theological Tower of Babel. Its architects and builders are bent on not simply tearing down the Reformation, but on taking the church back into pre-Reformation darkness. In the process (lest a Scripture-driven Christian have any doubts) McLaren and his fellow Emergents show us clearly that they are not Christians at all.

### **How Do Emergents Measure Up?**

How does this "new Reformation" compare to that of the 16th century, which freed Biblical Christianity from the shroud of Romanism? What of the five *solas* that were the rallying cries of that Reformation –

- *Sola Scriptura*: Our Authority is Scripture Alone
- *Sola Gratia*: Salvation is by Grace Alone
- *Solus Christus*: Salvation is Through Christ Alone
- *Sola Fide*: Justification is by Faith Alone
- *Soli Deo Gloria*: The Glory Belongs to God Alone

Emergents say that adherence to such fundamentals is "a constant reminder that religion can be a source of chaos and confusion."<sup>6</sup> But who is it that is really living in the realm of chaos and confusion — those whom the Emergents deride as "fundamentalists", or Emergents who have exalted themselves against the knowledge of God? In our [next article](#), we shall begin comparing the theological currents flowing through the Emergent Church with the Reformation's great and fundamental statements of the Biblical faith "once for all delivered to the saints."

### References:

1. We use the term "guru" advisedly; McLaren and other Emergent Church leaders position themselves as spiritual advisers imparting transcendental, higher knowledge – higher than the Word of God.
2. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional—Evangelical—Post-Protestant—Liberal/Conservative—Mystical/Poetic—Biblical—Charismatic/Contemplative—Fundamentalist/Calvinist—Anabaptist/Anglican—Methodist—Catholic—Green—Incarnational—Depressed-Yet-Hopeful—Emergent—Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004).
3. Her website, [phyllistickle.org](http://phyllistickle.org), notes that she was the "founding editor of the Religion Department of *Publishers Weekly*, the international journal of the book industry, is frequently quoted in print sources like *USA Today*, *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Times* as well as in electronic media like PBS, NPR, *The Hallmark Channel*, and innumerable blogs and web sites. Tickle is an authority on religion in America and a much sought after lecturer on the subject....Tickle is a founding member of The Canterbury Roundtable, and serves now, as she has in the past, on a number of advisory and corporate boards."
4. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, pages 11-12.
5. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 1913, republished in 2001 by Catholic University of America Press, pages 43 and 340.

6. Barry Taylor, "Converting Christianity" in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), page 165.

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