

Emergent Church Movement

What does the Emergent Church movement believe about the Reformation solas of salvation?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

As we continue our series, we examine the movement's "new Reformation" teachings versus the salvation solas of the 16th century Protestant Reformation:

- *Sola Gratia*: Salvation is by grace alone
- *Solus Christus*: Salvation is through Christ alone
- *Sola Fide*: Justification is by faith alone

Once again, we shall let Emergent spokesmen answer for themselves.

This is part three of the series. Read [part two](#).

An Insult to Their Intelligence

The writings of Emergent Church spokesmen contain many recurring themes, but one is especially prominent: The Biblical doctrine of personal salvation from sin and wrath by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, is an insult to their intelligence.

Emergent Church spokeswoman Nanette Sawyer is an ordained Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) minister with degrees from both Harvard and McCormick divinity schools. Her story is typical:

My explicit rejection of Christianity happened when our family minister implicitly rejected me. When I was a preteen, he visited our house, spoke with my parents, then pulled me aside, the eldest, for a chat of our own. He asked me if I was a Christian. This is a very interesting question to ask a child who has been raised in a Christian household. Being asked such a question I was, in essence,

being told that I might not be a Christian. I responded that I didn't know. The conversation went downhill from there and ended with my saying that I guessed I wasn't a Christian. He told me that I had to believe [on Jesus Christ as Savior] to be a Christian and I didn't believe it.

After that, I spent a good fifteen years defining myself as not Christian. Some of the things that I had been taught in Christian contexts, both explicitly and implicitly, were unacceptable to me. I was taught, for example, that there are good people and bad people, Christian people and non-Christian people, saved people and damned people, and we know who they are.

...I was taught that I was inherently bad, and that I would be judged for that. I was told that the only way out of the judgment was to admit how bad I was...

Thinking back on that pivotal interaction with my childhood minister, I believe the whole conversation missed the mark in a big way. He was defining Christian identity as assent to a list of certain beliefs, and he was defining Christian community as those people who concur with those beliefs...In asking me if I was a Christian, and accepting [my] answer, he essentially told me that I wasn't part of the community. I wasn't in; I was out.¹

Insulted by this, Sawyer says that she later became a "Christian" through Hindu meditation and the medieval, mystical Roman Catholic practice of "centering prayer" — all while a student at Harvard, taking a master's degree in comparative world religions. She then tells of her experience while attending the services of a liberal Presbyterian church in Boston:

The minister there invited me into the community by serving me communion without asking if I was a Christian... He didn't ask, "Are you one of us?" He

didn't say, "Do you believe?" He simply said, "Nanette, the body of Christ, given for you."²

On this basis, Sawyer says, she became a "Christian" and was subsequently ordained as a minister in the apostate PCUSA.

With all this background, you may understand the reason my statement of faith, my personal credo, written in seminary and required for ordination in the Presbyterian Church [USA], included the line: "I believe that all people are children of God, created and loved by God, and that God's compassionate grace is available to us at all times."

Imagine my surprise when a particular pastor challenged me on this point. He suggested that "children of God" is a biblical phrase, and that I was using it unbiblically. He believed that not all people are children of God, only Christians...³

Imagine a pastor having the nerve to say that to be a "child of God" is a doctrinal term with a specific Biblical meaning! How thoroughly un-postmodern can you get? Sawyer recounts her shocked reaction to this intellectual baboon: "I focused on not letting my jaw hit the floor." She continues:

So what about the Bible on this question of the children of God? Is it unbiblical to call all people the children of God? It is true that there are many places in the New Testament that talk about the children of God as the followers of Jesus. But it is not true that this must lead us to the kind of arrogance that asserts that non-Christians are not children of God....

Even if we could answer the question of who is and isn't a child of God, it wouldn't help us be better followers of Jesus; it would only help divide people into more categories.⁴

Sawyer goes on to misread three New Testament passages to support her contention that even the Bible itself is "undermining such an exclusionary claim."⁵

Rather than submitting to the Gospel teaching that only those who believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior have the authority to be called the children of God (John 1:12), Nanette Sawyer, like most of her fellow Emergents, takes refuge in the theology of paradox. Those who believe the Bible's categorical, propositional truth claims are arrogant and superficial, she says. They have not ascended to the lofty realms of higher knowledge that can only be attained by embracing paradox:

There is a beauty in paradox when it comes to talking about things of ultimate concern. Paradox works against our tendency to stay superficial in our faith, or to rest on easy answers or categorical thinking. It breaks apart our categories by showing the inadequacy of them and by pointing to a reality larger than us, the reality of gloria, of light, of beyond-the-beyond. I like to call it paradoxology – the glory of paradox, paradox-doxology – which takes us somewhere we wouldn't be capable of going if we thought we had everything all wrapped up, if we thought we had attained full comprehension. The commitment to embracing the paradox and resisting the impulse to categorize people (ourselves included) is one of the ways we follow Jesus into that larger mysterious reality of light and love.

The Gnostics, who sought to destroy the Biblical faith of the early church by leading it to a "higher" mystical knowledge beyond Scripture, would be proud of Nanette Sawyer. So would the church of Rome, whether 16th- or 21st-century.

Like Nanette Sawyer, Brian McLaren also takes umbrage at the Bible's doctrine of salvation:

...I used to believe that Jesus' primary focus was on saving *me* as an individual...For that reason I often spoke of Jesus as my "personal Savior" and urged others to believe in Jesus in the same way...⁶

Through the years...I became less and less comfortable with being restricted to the "personal Savior" gospel.⁷

McLaren says that his rejection of the Biblical Gospel is rooted in his rejection of the Bible's teaching of eternal punishment in Hell for those who do not receive Christ as Savior. He says that "radical rethinking" of the doctrine of Hell is needed.⁸ Since McLaren can't stand Jesus' own words on the subject (He spoke of Hell far more than of Heaven), he dares to put these words in Christ's mouth:

"I am here to save you...not by telling you to...focus on salvation from Hell after this life (as some people are going to do in My name) – but by giving you permission to start your participation in God's mission right now, right where you are, even as oppressed people. The opportunity to start living in this new and better way is available to you right now: The kingdom of God is at hand!"⁹

The audacity of Emergents in suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) seemingly knows no bounds.

Given these and other statements by Emergent Church leaders, it seems almost ludicrous to compare their mindset with the salvation solas of the Reformation, but we shall do so, because it further reveals the depths of their darkness.

Grace Alone?

The term "grace" does not appear often in Emergent writings, and the reason is simple: Since everyone is a "child of God," no one needs the kind of grace of which the Bible speaks. When Emergents do speak of "grace" at all, it is not as the basis of salvation from sin through Christ. In the Emergent lexicon, grace means

inclusiveness. And that is the basis on which, they claim, God is saving society and the environment through the moral example of Christ.

Emergent spokesman Samir Selmanovic, who grew up as a Muslim, became a Seventh Day Adventist pastor, and now serves on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, writes a chapter in *The Emergent Manifesto of Hope* called "The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness." His theme is that everyone, "Christian" and non-Christian, is going to be "saved" by the grace of inclusiveness:

For the last two thousand years, Christianity has granted itself a special status among religions. An emerging generation of Christians is simply saying, "No more special treatment. In the Scripture God has established a criteria [sic] of truth, and it has to do with the fruits of a gracious life" (see Matt. 7:15-23; John 15:5-8; 17:6-26). This is unnerving for many of us who have based our identity on a notion of possessing the truth in an abstract form. But God's table is welcoming to all who seek, and if any religion is to win, may it be the one that produces people who are the most loving, the most humble, the most Christlike. Whatever the meaning of "salvation" and "judgment," we Christians are going to be saved by grace, like everyone else, and judged by our works, like everyone else."¹⁰

By using such twisted definitions of "grace" Brian McLaren is able to assert that:

The average Roman Catholic today (at least, among those I meet) is increasingly clear about God's grace being a free gift, not something that can be earned or merited. It's hard to keep protesting against [such] people...¹¹

On the basis of such an inclusive "grace", McLaren says that we need to redefine – actually deconstruct – what it means to be a Protestant, and come together in an all-embracing Christendom:

"What if we were to redefine *protest* as 'pro-testifying,' *pro* meaning 'for' and *testify* meaning 'telling our story'? . . . Both Catholics and Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox too, can come together as pro-testifiers or post-Protestants now, because together we are reaching a point where we acknowledge...we have a lot to learn from the very people we've been protesting...[and] can come together searching for what we are for..."¹²

Christ Alone?

McLaren devotes several chapters in his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, to the subject of Jesus Christ. They are in a section deceptively titled "Why I am a Christian" in which McLaren brazenly demonstrates that he is no Christian at all.

Chapter one is titled "Seven Jesuses I Have Known"¹³ and chapter two is titled "Jesus and God."¹⁴ You may have already guessed from the title of the second chapter that McLaren teaches a distinction between Jesus and God. The undiscerning reader might miss this, at least in the beginning. McLaren uses a lot of Bible words and even Bible quotations to describe Christ. Jesus is the "Son of God" — "the image of God" — "the radiance of God's glory" — "the image of the invisible God." But McLaren's definitions of these terms are not the Bible's.

McLaren refuses ever to say that Jesus is God. He spends several pages explaining why he stops short of this: "God is not a male" (*italics his*).¹⁵ He goes on to say:

The masculine biblical imagery of "Father" and "Son" also contributes to the patriarchalism or chauvinism that has too often characterized Christianity...

There is so much more that could be said, but for now, let's conclude: "Son of God" is not intended to reduce or masculinize God...¹⁶

When McLaren comes to his fourth chapter, "Jesus: Savior of What?", he says that Christians have "demoted" Jesus by claiming that He died on the cross to save individuals' souls from eternal damnation:

I believe we've also misconstrued, reduced, twisted, and torqued the whole meaning of what words like savior, save, and salvation are supposed to mean for generously orthodox Christians.¹⁷

...it's best to suspend what, if anything, you "know" about what it means to call Jesus "Savior" and to give the matter of salvation some fresh attention.

Let's start simply. In the Bible, *save* means "rescue" or "heal." It emphatically does *not* automatically mean "save from hell" or "give eternal life after death" as many preachers seem to imply in sermon after sermon.¹⁸

Elsewhere in the same chapter, McLaren denies the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement for sinners, and places Jesus in the category of a moral example pointing the way in man's quest to improve society and the environment.

To say that Jesus is Savior is to say that in Jesus, God is intervening as Savior in all of these ways, judging (naming as evil), forgiving (breaking the vicious cycle of cause and effect, making reconciliation possible), and teaching (showing how to set chain reactions of good in motion). Jesus comes then not to condemn (to bring the consequences we deserve) but to save by shining the light on our evil, by naming our evil as evil so we can repent and escape the chain of bad actions and bad consequences through forgiveness, and so we can learn from Jesus the master-teacher to live more wisely in the future...¹⁹

"This," McLaren concludes, "is a window into the meaning of the cross."

Elsewhere in *A Generous Orthodoxy* McLaren makes it clear that when he uses Biblical terms such as "reconciliation" – "evil" – "repent" – and "forgiveness" he has nothing like the Bible's definitions in mind.

By "reconciliation" he means the reconciliation of oppressed social classes and their oppressors, and the reconciliation of those who differ theologically under the umbrella of inclusivism – not the reconciliation of men to God through the blood of Christ.

"Our evil" is "the oppression of the poor and disadvantaged" – not the sin nature and eternal death sentence passed on to the entire race through the Fall of Adam.

The "consequences we deserve" are societal and environmental consequences here on earth – not eternity in Hell.

"Repent" means making society and the physical world a better place – not turning from sin to faith in Christ, or ongoing repentance through the operation of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

"Forgiveness" means forgiving each other of our injustices – not being forgiven by God, the One offended in all offenses, based on propitiation of His wrath by the blood of Christ.

These things, not what the Bible actually teaches, are what McLaren and his fellow Emergents claim the Bible means by "words like savior, save, and salvation."

So much for *solus Christus*, salvation from eternal damnation through God the Son alone.

Faith Alone?

At this point it may seem even more absurd to ask about Emergents' attitude toward *sola fide*. But we press on, if only to demonstrate that Emergents' notions of "Biblical

faith" are at least as astonishingly un-Biblical as their notions of "grace" and "salvation".

We shall cite just one example. Emergent leader Randy Woodley, one of the contributors to *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, is a Cherokee Indian who works for an organization called First Nations Ministries. As a discerning Christian reads Woodley's chapter titled "Restoring Honor in the Land" it becomes obvious that his theology is rooted in the animism of the American Indian.

Woodley quotes liberal theologian Walter Brueggemann as saying that "land is central, if not the central theme of Biblical faith" (*italics his*). The Scripture-driven Christian may ask, "Really? And how is such a 'Biblical faith' to be worked out?" Woodley tells us: Through the "salvation" of Indian lands "stolen" by white Europeans – that is, the return of the entire North American continent to its "rightful owners" —

As a Native American, I view the land given to my people through covenant with the Creator as sacred. We have developed ceremonies, stories, and traditions [all steeped in pagan animism, we must note] that aid us in living a sacred life on the land. Living this life is one that is reminiscent of the original covenant with human beings in the garden. It can be characterized as a "shalom sense of place." Because our land was stolen, the nonindigene must find it difficult to feel the same congruity with the land. Yet the apparent sense of loss and incongruity felt by nonindigenes cannot be avoided until the issue of stolen land and missing relationship with America's host people is worked through.

The solutions will not come easily. There will be more pain and loss to be sure, and it will likely span several generations. Yet God's shalom kingdom demands that the issue of land be addressed. The issue must be addressed if Native Americans are ever to come back from marginality and into wholeness. It must be addressed if nonindigenous peoples ever hope to recover the missing sense

of place that God has always intended for all human beings to experience to gain integrity, congruence, and wholeness in their lives. Seeking out and establishing relationships between the emerging church and indigenous people is paramount to finding shalom and providing a secure future for the next seven generations.

So much for the Biblical faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ to save individuals from sin and eternal condemnation, apart from works. Authentic Christian faith focuses not on fixing up this dying world, but looks forward to "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). Authentic Christians seeks to win souls for that kingdom, not to rearrange the kingdoms of man on earth.

An Incredible Array of Heresies

The Emergent Church movement's "new Reformation" embodies an incredible array of past heresies. They begin with the denial of the inspiration, infallibility, and sole authority of the Scriptures. From there it is a short journey to the embrace of mystery – not in the Biblical sense of truth once hidden and subsequently revealed, but of inscrutable ambiguities open only to higher intellects; and the embrace of paradox – the god of "yes-and-no" instead of the God of "Yes, and Amen" (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). From there it is but a small step to deny the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ. And from there the headlong plunge into the abyss accelerates with the teaching of the false doctrine of a moral-example "atonement" by Christ on the cross, the social gospel of the mainline liberals, salvation (whatever that may mean) by moral effort, ecumenical inclusivism and syncretism, the lie of universalism, and even pagan animism.

How Can Evangelicals Speak of "Positives"?

How is it, then, that so many Evangelicals are embracing the Emergent Church movement, or expressing their appreciation for its "positives" while perhaps also weakly expressing their "concerns"? There are no positives about a movement that stands against everything the Bible stands for. And "concern" is a woefully insufficient response from people who are supposed to be engaged in spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness that are behind evils like the Emergent Church movement (Ephesians 6:10-12).

There is a reason why so many Evangelicals today are accommodating and even embracing the Emergent Church movement, and we shall discuss it in our [next article](#). That reason is intellectual pride – glorying in man rather than seeking the glory of God.

References:

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4. Sawyer, 46-47.
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6. Brian D. 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), page 107.
7. McLaren, 109.
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Emergents are certain of this: The Bible is not God's inspired, infallible, inerrant, uniquely authoritative Word.

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