

# B·I·B·L·E & L·I·F·E

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### Postmodernism & “Emergent” Churches

by David Dunlap

Today the church faces a threat far greater than the anti-supernaturalism of the 18th century rationalists and deists, potentially more damaging than the persecution under Islam or Communism, and more cunning in its inroads into the life of the church than mysticism and emotionalism. I am referring to postmodernism. To many sincere Christians, this rather new tool of the Enemy will be relatively unknown. However, among university students and those in government and the media, the concept and influence of postmodernist thinking is vigorous and pervasive. Postmodernism is a danger to every Christian tradition, whether it be Reformed, Dispensational, Arminian, or Charismatic. The postmodern threat is deadly to biblical truth and the Christian world view.

#### What is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism is a philosophic viewpoint that rejects the concept that there is absolute truth. Postmodernists believe that truth is an illusion; they see it as a veiled disguise to gain political and financial power and to oppress the less informed. They cynically dismiss all the claims of objective truth as worthless and empty promises. They reject philosophic, scientific, political truths, but most of all they reject objective Christian truth as revealed in the Scriptures. Postmodernists teach that the Modern Age began in 1500 A. D. and came to an end in 2000 A. D. The Modern Age was characterized by reason, objectivity, scientific study, and truth, as they flowed out of the Protestant Reformation and later the European Enlightenment period. Postmodernism interprets expansionist capitalism, Communism, anti-environmental attitudes, and the destruction of native peoples all as outgrowths of modernism. The new Postmodern Age, it is said, has rejected many of the values that have come to us from the so-called “Modern Age”. It is intolerant of absolute truth; in fact, it is more fashionable to make no claims to truth at all. Postmodernism places the individual first and foremost, setting aside traditional institutions that have been championed over the past five hundred years, namely, the church, marriage, and the family. However, the church has not done a very good job of defending itself from the attacks of postmodernism. Many believe that postmodernism has so infiltrated the church that it is transforming the very doctrines and practices that have set the church apart from the world. George Barna, in his book *What Americans Believe: an Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States*, effectively argues that postmodernism has so influenced the church that in many segments of the United States the church is essentially a postmodern church.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the United States a new fast-growing movement of churches has arisen, called the “Emergent Church” that unashamedly claims to be postmodern in its approach.

**“The greatest challenge facing the church today is postmodernism. What is at stake is not just Christian truth but whether any assertion can be regarded as truth.**

**Postmodernism obscures all distinctions, including distinctions regarding right and wrong, true and false, and heaven and hell.”**

**Donald Williams**

from *The Church and the Postmodern Challenge*

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## Postmodernism and the Mega-Church Movement

The Australian L'Abri leader Frank Stootman has stated, "Postmodernists are so focused on I, me, myself that they have trouble focusing on anything beyond themselves."<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism is consumed with what the individual feels, thinks, wants, and dislikes. This aspect of postmodernism is especially evident in the modern mega-church. Today, the secular unbeliever has the greatest influence in the church. The music, preaching, and outreach of the postmodern church are not designed primarily to exalt Christ or even build up the believer, but rather to attract the unbeliever. Does this new approach bring with it negative consequences? How will it affect future generations?

In his book *The Prevailing Church*, Randy Pope, a church leader and author asks the modern Church Growth Movement to re-examine its postmodern principles and its impact on future generations. He says:

*It is common to have a potential church-planter call me to talk about starting a new church. I typically ask him to describe the church he plans to plant. Quite often I hear, "It's going to be a Willow Creek type of church." I usually follow up with another question: "What is the downside of such a strategy?" Unfortunately, the usual response is a blank stare and the admission that he has not considered any downsides. I ask him to consider the following: When will believers worship together? How will you train leaders? When will there be the expository preaching of a book of the Bible? Where, for instance, will people receive teaching on the book of Isaiah?...I fear the impact of the modern church-growth movement on future generations.<sup>3</sup>*

The postmodern church's message and doctrinal content has been altered to meet secular unbelievers' needs and insure that they feel comfortable. Fundamental doctrines of the Bible that seem offensive to the unbeliever have been quietly removed from the church. Popular themes of personal improvement, a doctrinal de-emphasis, and a light preaching style are all brought into the church for the purpose of filling the church. In the process, the church of Jesus Christ has been transformed into the church of secular values. The purposes and standards that God has for His church have been replaced with the purposes and standards of the world. Mega-church leader Mark Mittelberg writes:

*I also tend to talk in terms of receiving Jesus as "Forgiver and Leader" rather than "Savior and Lord." This is an attempt to convey biblical concepts while avoiding misleading connotations in some people's mind of medieval "lords" who were rulers over castles. I also avoid the word "master", which for some people might evoke images of slavery and oppressive taskmasters. You may not like the way I translate some of these concepts. That's okay.<sup>4</sup>*

Postmodernism has removed Christ from His central place within the church and replaced Him with secularism. The sad result is that the Lord Jesus Christ has been reduced to an indistinct and undefined blur. Some will rise in defense and say, "Isn't this simply a question of different methods?" "What harm is there in a new approach to outreach?" There have been different approaches to evangelism in every age of the church. All Christians rejoice when the gospel is proclaimed and souls are won for Christ. There have been different music styles in every age and the church has been blessed by their richness, however, there is something different going on here. This postmodern emphasis upon the individual has sent the message that the individual is more important than truth and New Testament doctrine. The postmodern church has set aside the corporate worship of Christ, the expository teaching of the Scriptures, and the

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**"McLaren suggests that we should embrace the existence of different faiths...What would this mean? Well, a complete reconsideration of Christian missions... He writes: " I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist and Hindu contexts."**

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**Albert Mohler**  
citing Brian McLaren writing  
in his new book *Generous  
Orthodoxy* (Zondervan)

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preaching of the gospel because these practices are “too spiritual” for the secular man and may turn him off to the church. The postmodern message has been clearly passed on: All obstacles that stand in the way of reaching the secular individual must be removed, even if the obstacle is church doctrine. This leads us to the next phase in the postmodern attack on the church.

### **Postmodernism, the “Emergent” Church, and Biblical Doctrine**

This postmodern perspective has so infiltrated the modern evangelical church that essential biblical truths are being compromised. “Emergent” church leaders are now arguing that the teaching of “propositional truth”(that is biblical doctrines such as hell, inerrancy, and even salvation by faith in Christ) is arrogant, intolerant, and ultimately harmful to the cause of Christ. They argue that the Bible is not the only revelation of truth. Moreover, they suggest, how can we be sure of what the Bible teaches, considering that there are so many doctrinal differences among Christians. Many wonder about the origin and background of the “Emergent” movement and why it developed?

Young people who have been raised in the slick packaging of “seeker-friendly” fellowships and the materialism of contemporary mega-churches are finding that these churches are leaving them spiritually empty. More and more, younger Christians are looking for simple gatherings of Christians that can feed their souls with heartfelt worship and fellowship. Clint Rainey, a journalism student interning at the *Dallas Morning News*, writes that his generation is put off by the “seeker-friendly” approach that fills churches but leaves many spiritually empty. He writes, “These churches attract middle-age adults like iron fillings but my generation isn’t in much awe.” Rainey contends that mega-churches are much too materialistic and impersonal. Young people aren’t impressed with the technology, commercialism, and over emphasis on “stuff” in the modern church. Today’s young adults crave real religion.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these young people are drifting into churches that follow the “Emergent” church approach. Emergent church thinking has made inroads into many segments of the Evangelical church. Leading churches such as Solomon’s Porch in Seattle, WA, and Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, MI, are growing. Bookstore shelves are stocked with books espousing the “Emergent” gospel. Brian McLaren, a leader in the Emergent movement, has been called by *Time* magazine (Feb. 7, 2005) one of the 25 most influential Evangelical leaders in the U. S., and his book *A New Kind of Christian* received an Award of Merit from *Christianity Today* in 2002.

“Emergent” churches and their leaders have rejected the structure and message of the current contemporary mega-churches and traditional churches. While the “Emergent” church embraces more simplicity in church meetings, true fellowship, and reality in worship, it decries the professionalism, materialism, and commercialism of the mega-church. However, it is also unashamedly secular, postmodern, and liberal in much of its theology.

### **Postmodernism, Emergent Church, and the Teaching of Brian McLaren**

The mega-church’s limited embrace of postmodern thinking has paved the way for the Emergent church’s almost full-fledged endorsement of secular postmodern ideology and liberal theology. The Emergent church’s stress on feminism, environmentalism, pluralism, and the teaching of Darwinian evolutionary theory, while down-playing biblical doctrines of eternal punishment, inerrancy, and salvation by faith in Christ causes many concern.

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

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**Albert Mohler**  
citing Brian McLaren writing  
in his new book *Generous  
Orthodoxy* (Zondervan)

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Correspondence should be sent to:

**BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter**  
c/o David Dunlap  
3116 Gulfwind Drive  
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639  
(813) 996-1053

e-mail  
DavidDunlap@earthlink.net  
website

[www.biblefellowship.org/BibleAndLife/](http://www.biblefellowship.org/BibleAndLife/)

Respected evangelical leaders are calling the church to examine more carefully the teachings of the "Emergent" church and especially the writings of Brian McLaren. Dr. Douglas Groothuis, professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, has written a review of Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christian*. In his review entitled "A New Kind of Postmodern", he writes:

*There are many objectionable items in this small but dangerous book, including its flippant endorsement of evolution, its unorthodox speculations on heaven and hell as not being separate places...there is enough truth mixed to make the errors seem more attractive.<sup>6</sup>*

Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in his review of Brian McLaren's book *Generous Orthodoxy*, writes:

*The Bible, McLaren argues, is intended to equip God's people for good works. He rejects words such as authority, inerrancy, and infallibility as unnecessary and distracting. In a previous work, McLaren had argued that the Bible is "a unique collection of literary artifacts that together support the telling of an amazing and essential story." The Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity.<sup>7</sup>*

The accommodation of church to popular culture has been a subtle deception that usually leads to the weakening of the church rather than to the winning of the lost. Whenever the church has met the challenges of culture with biblical preaching, strong evangelism, and spiritual worship then Christ is exalted and souls are led to salvation. May the church resist the sophistry of evangelical postmodernism and return to the sure foundation of Scripture.

## Endnotes

1. George Barna, *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991)
2. Gene Edward Vieth, "Taking the Roof Off", *World Magazine*, March 26, 2005, p. 34
3. Randy Pope, *The Prevailing Church*, (Chicago: IL: Moody Press, 2002), p. 189-190,197
4. Mark Mittleberg, *Building A Contagious Church*,(Grand Rapids,MI:Zondervan,2001),52
5. Clint Rainey, "Mega Burnout", *Dallas Morning News*, July 25, 2005
6. D. Groothuis, *New Kind of Postmodernist*,vol. 25, 03, *Christian Research Journal*, p. 58
7. Albert Mohler, *Generous Orthodoxy-Is it Orthodox*, Crosswalk.com, Feb. 16, 2005

