

The Clarity of Scripture, Part 4

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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4. McLaren and Religious Ecumenism

The exclusivity of the Christian gospel is an unmistakable theme that runs throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, the Lord plainly told the Hebrew people:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Ex. 20:3-6; cf. 20:23; 23:24; 34:14; Lev. 19:4; Josh. 23:7; 2 Kgs 17:35)

In the New Testament, the message is equally clear. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). The apostle Peter proclaimed to a hostile audience, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The apostle John wrote, "... but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Again and again, Scripture stresses that Jesus Christ is the only hope of salvation for the world. "For there is one God [and] one mediator also between God and men, [the] Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Only Christ can atone for sin, and therefore only Christ can provide salvation. "And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:11-12).

Of course, those truths are antithetical to the central tenet of postmodernism. They make exclusive, universal truth-claims, authoritatively declaring Christ the only true way to heaven and all other belief-systems erroneous. That is what Scripture teaches. It is also what the true church has proclaimed throughout her history. It is the message of Christianity. And it simply cannot be adjusted to accommodate postmodern sensitivities and immoralities.

McLaren, however, flatly rejects the straightforward exclusivism of Scripture. In his version of orthodoxy, Christians should "see members of other religions and non-religions not as enemies but as beloved neighbors, whenever possible, as dialogue partners and even collaborators" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 35). Thus, "having acknowledged and accepted the coexistence of other faiths, Christians should actually talk with people of other faiths, engaging in gentle and respectful dialogue. ... We must assume that God is an unseen partner in our dialogues who has something to teach all participants, including us" (*Ibid.*, 257-58). Later he writes:

To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus (while learning it better myself), I would gladly become one of them (whoever they are) to whatever degree I can, to embrace them, to join them, to enter into their world without judgment but with saving love, as mine has been entered by the Lord. I do this *because of my deep identity as a fervent Christian*, not in spite of it. (*Ibid.*, 264; cf. *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 4-8)

In light of his apparent openness to non-Christian faiths, it is not surprising that he finds all broadly Christian religions to also be equally valid. After discussing the "Jesus" of the Conservative Protestant, the Pentecostal, the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, the Liberal Protestant, the Anabaptist, and the Liberation Theologian, he asks,

Why not celebrate them all? ... Up until recent decades, each tribe felt it had to uphold one image of Jesus and undermine some or all of the others. What if, instead, we saw these various emphases as partial projections that together can create a hologram; a richer, multidimensional vision of Jesus?

What if we enjoy them all, the way we enjoy foods from differing cultures? Aren't we glad we can enjoy Thai food this week, Chinese next, Italian the following week, Mexican next month, and Khmer after than? What do we gain by saying that Chinese food is permissible, but Mexican food is poison? Isn't there nourishment and joy (and pleasure) to be had from each tradition? (*Ibid.*, 66)

Without question, the Bible's claim that salvation is in Christ alone by faith alone is certainly out of harmony with the emergent notion of "tolerance." But it is, after all, just what the Bible plainly teaches. In the words of John Frame,

But again, McLaren is insensitive to spiritual warfare. The Bible is sharply negative toward false worship, the worship of idols, rather than the true God. Paul's missionary labors were not only positive, but also negative: to turn the Gentiles away from their idols to serve Christ (as in Acts 17:29-31, 1 Thess. 1:9). . . . Insofar as McLaren confuses the issue of false worship, he confuses something of vital importance to the God of Scripture. (Online Source)

Only by turning a blind eye to the Bible's clear teaching, can the broad ecumenism of McLaren be entertained with any enthusiasm.

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