

The Clarity of Scripture, Part 5

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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5. McLaren and Conservative Evangelicals

Fifth, McLaren strongly criticizes those who believe that the Bible can be interpreted clearly. This criticism is most sharply leveled at Reformed conservatives--namely, those who are most committed to the clear teachings of Scripture, and the propositional truths found in the Bible.

For example, McLaren compares the five points of Calvinism to "cigarettes, the use of which often leads to a hard-to-break Protestant habit that is hazardous to spiritual health (and that makes the breath smell bad)" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 195), and describes systematic theologies as "conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument" which demonstrate the "arrogant intellectualizing" of modern evangelicals (*Ibid.*, 151-52). He denounces those who hold, with any conviction, to "a foundationalist epistemology," biblical inerrancy, or the *solas* of the Reformation (cf. *Ibid.*, 117, 159-60, 164, 198). Says McLaren, "The belief that truth is best understood by reducing it to a few fundamentals or a single 'sola' insight is, to me, at least questionable if not downright dangerous" (*Ibid.*, 198).

Those who believe the Bible presents clear propositional truth statements, which can be believed and defended with certainty, are negatively described as those who "claim (overtly, covertly, or unconsciously) to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever" (*Ibid.*, 286) and who "claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall" (*Ibid.*, 293). Near the beginning of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren admits:

. . . you should know that I am horribly unfair in this book, lacking all scholarly objectivity and evenhandedness. My own upbringing was way out on the end of one of the most conservative twigs of one of the most conservative branches of one of the most conservative limbs of Christianity, and I am far harder on conservative Protestant Christians who share that heritage than I am on anyone else. I'm sorry. I am consistently oversympathetic to Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, even dreaded liberals, while I keep elbowing my conservative brethren in the ribs in a most annoying--some would say ungenerous--way. I cannot even pretend to be objective or fair. (p. 35)

But the reason for the rub is much deeper than merely a reaction, by McLaren, to his upbringing. The problem is that the propositionalism of conservative, biblical Christianity is antithetical to, and incompatible with, McLaren's post-conservative, ambiguous *non-orthodoxy*. The two are mutually exclusive.

Interestingly, McLaren also redefines *humility* as a willingness to accept doctrinal uncertainty, and then promotes it as the foremost virtue of his emergent worldview.

...what we need is not new sectarian terminology or new jargon or a new elitist clique, but rather a humble rediscovery of the simple, mysterious way of Jesus that can be embraced across the whole Christian horizon (and beyond). What we need is something lived, not just talked or written about. The last thing we need is a new group of proud, super protestant, hyper puritan, ultra restorationist reformers who say, "Only we've got it right!" and thereby damn everybody else to the bin of five minutes ago and the bucket of below-average mediocrity. ... A generous orthodoxy, in contrast to the tense narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, doesn't take itself too seriously. It is humble; it doesn't claim too much; it admits it walks with a limp. (Ibid., 19, 155)

Tolerance, then, is the new humility. Blind to the outrageous pride of condescendingly elevating oneself above the church's greatest theologians and exegetes, McLaren insists that his position is humble. But those who are unwilling to tolerate other ideas, even when those ideas contradict the plain reading of Scripture, he denounces as arrogant, disrespectful, and insensitive (Ibid., 258-59). In this way, McLaren attempts to discredit those who boldly proclaim the clear message of Scripture. **Instead of humbly acknowledging and submitting to the clarity of God's revealed Word--which is true humility (Is. 66:1-2), McLaren redefines humility in order to undercut his detractors without having to address their arguments.** Perhaps this is why more conservative pastors, even within the broader ECM, find McLaren's approach so dangerous. In the words of Mark Driscoll:

Postmodernity is tough to pin down, though, because it changes the rules of hermeneutics but keeps the Bible. Some post-modern pastors keep the Bible but reduce it to a story lacking any authority over us, feeling free to play with the interpretation and meaning of particular texts. They do not believe in a singular truthful interpretation. They believe that the interpreter ultimately has authority over the text and can therefore use it as he or she pleases rather than submit to it.

While this dance may seem novel, it is as old as Eden. Satan first used this tactic on Adam and Eve, and later used it to tempt Jesus, by manipulating God's Word to change its meaning. In previous generations, the fight was over the inerrancy of Scripture. Today, the fight is over the authority and meaning of Scripture. (*The Radical Reformation*, 168)

Concluding Remarks Regarding Brian McLaren

There will be some, no doubt, who find the above analysis unfair or unloving. But there is much more at stake, with Brian McLaren and his collaborators at Emergent, than mere semantics or slight philosophical disagreement. The purity of the gospel itself is at stake. If God's Word cannot be understood with certainty then a saving comprehension of the gospel becomes an impossible task. But if the straightforward reading of Scripture is allowed to stand, then McLaren's system of doctrinal subjectivity crashes to the ground. As D.A. Carson observes in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*: "I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and [Steve] Chalke [another ECM author] have largely abandoned the gospel" (p. 186).

For those who share "the love of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:10), and who are committed to "guard what has been entrusted" to them (1 Tim. 6:20), no room can be made for the philosophical agenda of Emergent. The apostle Paul reserved the harshest words for those who would undermine the gospel:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed! (Gal. 1:6-9)

And the Lord Himself warned His followers, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). After all, those who distort the Scriptures do so to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16).

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