Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Emergent Church is a Form of Paganism
Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 Corinthians 9:19-23
Code: A277

Paul Edwards, host of “The Paul Edwards Program” on WLQV in Detroit, interviewed pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church John MacArthur about the emerging church movement in America. Paul begins the interview by asking Pastor John to respond to a radio interview with prominent emerging church leader Doug Pagitt. In the clip from October 22, 2007, Pagitt denied that there is a place of eternal conscious torment for persons who die apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul Edwards : Help me with this—the emerging church prides itself on conversation, having a conversation, so let’s have a conversation. How can you have a conversation with someone, when you’re not even speaking the same language?

John MacArthur: Let me just cut to the chase on this one: [Doug] Pagitt is a Universalist. What he was saying is real simple. He was saying when you die your spirit goes to God and judgment means that whatever was not right about you, whatever was bad about you, whatever was substantially lacking about you, gets all resolved. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a Buddhist, a Hindu or a Muslim—doesn’t matter whether you’re a Christian really; we’re all going to end up in this wonderful, warm and fuzzy relationship with God. That’s just classic universalism.

I think you know it’s most helpful, Paul, to go back and kind of recast how we view these people. He’s not a pastor; he’s not a Christian; that’s not a church. When you call yourself a Christian and you call yourself a pastor and you say you have a church, all of that has to be—to be legitimate—defined biblically. And if it’s not, that’s not a church and you’re not a pastor and you’re not even a Christian.

What you have here is a form of false religion. A form of paganism that basically wants to be thought of as Christian because it gains a certain ground. But the underlying bottom line of this whole emerging movement is they don’t believe in any doctrine, they don’t believe in any theology. They don’t want to be forced to interpret anything in Scripture a certain way and the out is, “Well the Bible isn’t clear anyway.” In other words, we don’t know what it means; we can’t know what it means.

Brian McLaren says nobody has ever gotten it right—we haven’t got it right now—so let’s not make an issue out of anything. Let’s just be open to everything. Let’s not take a position on theology, or for that matter, on morality or behavior because, hey, there’s no judgment anyway so we’re all going to end up in God in some ethereal, eternal relationship. And that’s just non-Christian. It is blatantly, flagrantly non-Christian. It’s as non-Christian as any false religion.

Edwards : [When “Emergents” and many seeker-sensitive church advocates say “We do church a certain way,”] it seems to me that they do it by totally ignoring the book of Acts and the Epistles.

MacArthur: I’m going to seem anachronistic if not an outright dinosaur at this point. I believe the church has one function, and that is to guard the truth, to proclaim the truth and to live the truth. So you take the Word of God, you teach it, you proclaim it, you protect it, you defend it, and you live it, and that’s a church. The Word of God rightly divided, rightly understood.

That’s not the idea in a seeker church; that’s not the idea certainly in an emerging church. Everything becomes style and contextualization and everything is built around the manipulation of people’s hot buttons as if we were selling a product like any other product in our culture. This fails to understand that the only real power in the spiritual realm is Divine and that God works His power through His truth, and that’s all that matters.

I think the illusion of success is created by crowds. You’ve probably heard recently that Bill Hybels, who is the guru of the seeker movement, has openly confessed that they did a big survey and found they’ve been doing it wrong.

Edwards : “We made a mistake,” he said.

MacArthur: Yes, we made a mistake. And so, the solution is—one of the lines in the statement was—we gotta get a blank piece of paper and start all over again. That’s exactly the problem. Why do you want a blank piece of paper when you have all kinds of paper full with the Word of God?

Edwards : Right.

MacArthur: If you want a biblical mandate and you want to do ministry biblically, you teach and preach the Word. I don’t think it matters whether you have smoke and mirrors. I don’t think it matters whether you wear a tie, or don’t wear a tie, whether you wear a black T-shirt and holes in your knees or a blue suit. (I think there are reasons to go with the suit rather the grunge approach—of dignity, respect, sober mindedness, seriousness, loftiness, etc, etc.)

At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is that we proclaim the Word of God. Look, I’ve been doing this for so long, and I haven’t changed anything. Contexts come, contexts go; fads come, fads go; styles come, styles go. I just keep doing the same thing. We show up on Sunday morning, we sing a little bit, we pray, we open the Word of God and explain His meaning to the people. The people just keep coming and coming and what I say goes around the world, on radio, and then it gets transferred into 50 languages and books and commentaries because [the Word] knows no boundaries. It knows no cultural restraint, because the Word of God is transcendent.

Edwards : One of the things I get most frustrated about is whenever people like you who are standing for truth point out the error both in the emergent church and in the seeker movement people will immediately run to 1 Corinthians 9 and begin screaming, “You know Paul said, ‘I became all things to all men,’ which means to the grunge I become as grunge, to the Universalist I become as a Universalist.” But in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul isn’t saying that we compromise the message and we become whatever the audience needs us to be in order to make the gospel palatable.

MacArthur: Well, of course not. All he is saying is there’s a foundation in the proclamation of the gospel with the Jew and there’s a different starting point with the Gentile. If I’m going to evangelize a Jew, I’m going to start with the Old Testament because that’s the substantial basis. So every time the Apostle Paul preached to the Jews he started with the Scripture—the Old Testament Scripture. Every time he evangelized Gentiles he started with creation. For example, in Acts 14 and Acts 17 he talks about the unknown God. Who is the unknown God? He’s the God who made everything—that was the foundation.

All he is saying in 1 Corinthians 9 is you must understand the starting point of your audience and here’s the point: *ideologically*. In other words, how do they think ideologically, philosophically, religiously? What are the ideas, the theories, the viewpoints that they hold? It’s not about identifying with their lifestyle; it’s not about being able to converse about every episode of South Park, every R-rated movie and every Rap song—that’s not it at all.

How do people think religiously, how do they perceive truth?—those are the starting points that Paul was establishing. That’s a far cry from saying that to reach this generation we must do their music, we must dress the way they dress, we must live the way they live, we must be familiar with the baser components of their culture. That’s a million miles from what the Apostle Paul had in mind. He was talking about those things that controlled their thought process and their worldview.

Paul Edwards is the host of The Paul Edwards Program, a columnist and pastor. His program is heard daily on WLQV in Detroit and on godandculture.com.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).