

Perspicuity of Scripture: The Emergent Approach

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-5; Leviticus 18:22; Isaiah 66:1-2; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Peter 1:3; Jude 7

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The most recent battle being waged in the evangelical church is one related to the perspicuity of Scripture. Within the larger context of the Emerging Church Movement is the Emergent Church, whose leading spokesman is Brian D. McLaren. Because of his prominence as a leader of both the Emergent Church and the Emerging Church Movement, what he says about the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture needs to be scrutinized. McLaren undermines the clarity of Scripture by questioning whether biblical doctrine can be held with certainty. He questions the clarity of Scripture by needlessly introducing complexity into biblical interpretation. He further dismisses scriptural clarity by questioning the possibility of deriving propositional truth from the Bible. Also, his refusal to abide by the Bible's emphasis on the exclusive nature of the Christian gospel raises questions about the Bible's clarity. McLaren's pointed criticism of conservative evangelicals who insist on the clarity of Scripture is another indication of his disdain for the perspicuity of Scripture. McLaren's position on the perspicuity of Scripture is clearly at odds with what the Bible itself says about its own clarity.

From the very beginning, the battle between good and evil has been a battle for the truth. The serpent, in the Garden of Eden, began his temptation by questioning the truthfulness of God's previous instruction: "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'? . . . You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:1, 4-5). And this has been his tactic ever since—casting doubt on the straightforward revelation of God.

Throughout the centuries, that ages-old war on truth has been repeatedly fought, even within the church. The biblical writer Jude, for instance, faced such a situation when he wrote his epistle. Though he had wanted to write about the wonders of the common salvation that he shared with his readers, he was compelled instead to urge his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Genesis 3:3). False teachers, like spiritual terrorists, had secretly crept into the church (Genesis 3:4). The lies they were spreading, like doctrinal hand grenades, were spiritually devastating. They were enemies of the truth, and Jude was compelled to confront and expose them.

Over the past few decades, the church in the United States has fought the same battle on several fronts. In the sixties and seventies, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy came under direct attack. The Bible, it was said, was full of errors, and thus could not be trusted as historically or scientifically accurate. In the eighties and nineties, the sufficiency of Scripture was targeted. The charismatic movement (with its need for additional revelation from God) and Christian psychology (with its emphasis on neo-Freudian counseling techniques) attempted to undermine the fact that God "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him" as

revealed in Scripture (2 Peter 1:3).

As the millennium drew to a close, the attack on God's revealed truth came in a new way. This time the relevance of Scripture was the point of attack. Rather than being directly maligned, church leaders for whom biblical teaching was simply not a major priority quietly discarded the Bible. "The Seeker Movement" to some degree advocated limiting the presentation of divine truth to what unbelievers are willing to tolerate.

A new movement is now arising in evangelical circles. Apparently, the main object of attack will be the perspicuity of Scripture. Influenced by postmodern notions about language, meaning, subjectivity, and truth, many younger evangelicals are questioning whether the Word of God is clear enough to justify certainty or dogmatism on points of doctrine. Ironically, this new movement to a certain extent ignores all the previous debates. Instead, its proponents are more interested in dialogue and conversation. As a result, they scorn and rebuff propositional truth (which tends to end dialogue rather than cultivate it) as an outmoded vestige of twentieth-century modernism.

The movement is very diverse and still developing, but it is generally called "the Emerging Church."

Emerging, Emergent, and Brian D. McLaren

The Emerging Church Movement (hereafter, ECM) is made up of an admittedly broad and variegated collection of pastors and church leaders, with a common concern for Christian mission to a postmodern generation.

At the heart of the "movement"—or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the "conversation"—lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is "emerging." Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation, the emerging generation. (1)

Mark Driscoll, an ECM pastor, defines the movement this way:

The emerging church is a growing, loosely connected movement of primarily young pastors who are glad to see the end of modernity and are seeking to function as missionaries who bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to emerging and postmodern cultures. The emerging church welcomes the tension of holding in one closed hand the unchanging truth of evangelical Christian theology (Jude 3) and holding in one open hand the many cultural ways of showing and speaking Christian truth as a missionary to America (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Since the movement, if it can be called that, is young and is still defining its theological center, I do not want to portray the movement as ideologically unified because I myself swim in the theologically conservative stream of the emerging church. (2)

In calling himself a theological conservative, however, Driscoll seems to be in the minority among ECM leaders. The neo-liberal thrust embraced by the majority of those in ECM is spearheaded by Emergent, an organization begun in 2001 whose deliberate desire is to impact the entire movement.

By 2001, we had formed an organization around our friendship, known as Emergent, as a means of inviting more people into the conversation. Along with us, the "emerging church" movement has been

growing, and we in Emergent Village endeavor to fund the theological imaginations and spiritual lives of all who consider themselves a part of this broader movement. (3)

Because of the influence of Emergent, many see the term as synonymous with “emerging,” referring to the movement as a whole as the Emergent Church Movement. Those who are more conservative, however, differentiate between the terms. As Driscoll writes,

I was part of what is now known as the Emerging Church Movement in its early days and spent a few years traveling the country to speak to emerging leaders in an effort to help build a missional movement in the United States. The wonderful upside of the emerging church is that it elevates mission in American culture to a high priority, which is a need so urgent that its importance can hardly be overstated.

I had to distance myself, however, from one of many streams in the emerging church because of theological differences. Since the late 1990s, this stream has become known as Emergent. The emergent church is part of the Emerging Church Movement but does not embrace the dominant ideology of the movement. Rather the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity. (4)

It is this particular segment of ECM, the Emergent Church, that has most blatantly attacked the clarity and authority of the Scripture. And of all the voices that make up Emergent, the most prominent belongs to Brian D. McLaren. For this reason, this article will focus primarily on him and his teachings.

McLaren has been called the emerging church’s “most influential thinker,” (5) as well as “the de facto spiritual leader for the emerging church.” (6) He currently serves as the chair of the board of directors for Emergent Village, and is a frequent guest on television programs and radio shows. In February 2005, he was listed as “One of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America” by Time Magazine. (7) His books include *A New Kind of Christian*, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and most-recently *The Secret Message of Jesus*. Because of his prominent role within both Emergent, and the larger ECM, it is appropriate to critique his views—recognizing that in many ways they represent the philosophical underpinnings of the whole.

Brian McLaren and the Clarity of Scripture

The doctrine of the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture (i.e., that the central message of the Bible is clear and understandable, and that the Bible itself can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense) has been a cornerstone of evangelical belief ever since the Reformation. The dominant Roman Catholic idea had been that the Bible was obscure and difficult to understand. But the Reformers disagreed, arguing instead that anyone who could read could understand biblical teaching. Rather than limiting biblical interpretation to the clergy or the Magisterium, the Reformers encouraged lay Christians to study and interpret God’s Word on their own. This was premised on the Reformed belief that the Bible itself was inherently clear and that God had the ability to communicate His message to men in an understandable fashion. As Luther explained to Erasmus:

But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from [our] own blindness or want [i.e., lack] of understanding, who do not go the way to see the

all-perfect clearness of truth. . . . Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God. . . . If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures but he that hath the Spirit of God. . . . If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous; but all things that are in the Scriptures, are by the Word brought forth into the clearest light, and proclaimed to the whole world. (8)

Though such an understanding, as Luther openly admits, did not demand complete agreement among Protestants on every secondary doctrine, it did establish an important principle: That the Word of God was revealed in an understandable way, that its central message is clear, and that (because it is clear) all men are fully accountable to its message.

In contrast to this, the teachings of Brian McLaren (and others of his Emergent persuasion) directly assault the doctrine of biblical clarity. Instead of promoting a settled confidence in the fact that the Bible can be understood, McLaren does just the opposite. And he does so in at least five important ways.

1. McLaren and Doctrinal Uncertainty

McLaren undermines the clarity of Scripture by denying that biblical doctrine can be held with any degree of certainty. Certainty, of course, comes from clarity. Where there is no clarity, there is no certainty. And vice versa.

For the Reformers, it was because the Bible was clear that they were certain about its central message. But not so for McLaren, who says: "Certainty is overrated. . . . History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren't."⁹ And in another place,

When we talk about the word 'faith' and the word 'certainty,' we've got a whole lot of problems there. What do we mean by 'certainty'? . . . Certainty can be dangerous. What we need is a proper confidence that's always seeking the truth and that's seeking to live in the way God wants us to live, but that also has the proper degree of self-critical and self-questioning passion. (10)

In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren even champions ambiguity. He writes,

A warning: as in most of my other books, there are places here where I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity. (11)

So it is no surprise when he readily admits that he is not even sure if what he is espousing is correct.

If I seem to show too little respect for your opinions or thought, be assured I have equal doubts about my own, and I don't mind if you think I'm wrong. I'm sure I am wrong about many things, although I'm not sure exactly which things I'm wrong about. I'm even sure I'm wrong about what I think I'm right about in at least some cases. So wherever you think I'm wrong, you could be right. If, in the process of determining that I'm wrong, you are stimulated to think more deeply and broadly, I hope that I will have somehow served you anyway. (12)

For McLaren, benefit comes not from being right, but from dialoguing with those of all different viewpoints. Thus, great reward results in always pursuing but never finally arriving at truth. Correctness in doctrine is something that cannot be attained—at least not with any degree of certainty. In McLaren’s words, “The achievement of ‘right thinking’ therefore recedes, happily, farther beyond our grasp the more we pursue it. As it eludes us, we are strangely rewarded: we feel gratitude and love, humility and wonder, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming.” (13) In his view, Christians “must be open to the perpetual possibility that our received derstandings of the gospel may be faulty, imbalanced, poorly nuanced, or downright warped and twisted . . . [and must] continually expect to rediscover the gospel.” (14)

McLaren rightly anticipates that theological conservatives will find such an approach to biblical doctrine unacceptable.

If, for you, orthodox means finally “getting it right” or “getting it straight,” mine is a pretty disappointing, curvy orthodoxy. But if, for you, orthodoxy isn’t a list of correct doctrines, but rather the doxa in orthodoxy means “thinking” or “opinion,” then the lifelong pursuit of expanding thinking and deepening, broadening opinions about God sounds like a delight, a joy. (15)

By reducing biblical doctrines to “opinions,” McLaren denies both Scripture’s clarity and its authority. Because the Bible is unclear, the chorus of divergent interpretations are all granted equal validity. This means that the authority of any one viewpoint (as that which is correct) vanishes, since all sides are equally reduced to nothing more than personal opinions.

2. McLaren and Interpretive Complexity

McLaren sees such incredible degrees of complexity, with even the most straightforward biblical teachings, that he hopelessly obscures what the Bible makes simple. One of many examples would be his vacillation with regard to homosexuality. Though the issue is clear cut in Scripture (Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; cf. Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; Jude 7), McLaren remains unsure. He expresses his opinion this way:

Frankly, many of us don’t know what we should think about homosexuality. We’ve heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.” That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren’t sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn. (16)

In other words, McLaren sees so much complexity—in both the biblical prohibition and the contemporary practice regarding homosexual behavior—that he is unable to respond definitively to the question of homosexuality. Though such a blatant disregard for the straightforward teaching of Scripture hardly needs a response, Doug Wilson’s rebuttal seems particularly apropos.

If someone were to ask me whether the Bible teaches that Jesus went to Capernaum, I would say

yes, it does. I would not be in agony over the question. It is not the most important question, but it is clear. If someone were to ask if the apostle Paul taught that homosexual behavior (both male and female forms) is the dead end result of idolatry, I would say yes again. No agony in the exegesis whatever. There is only agony if you are lusting after respect from the world, which they will not give to you unless you are busy making plenty of room for their lusts. And that is what the emergent movement is doing—this is really all about sex. And, conveniently enough, this has the added benefit of making room for evangelical lusts. Son of a gun. All that agony paid off. (17)

For McLaren, other areas of ambiguity (or even outright disregard for the straightforward reading of Scripture) include doctrines like eternal punishment, (18) eternal life, (19) biblical inerrancy, (20) divine sovereignty, (21) divine masculinity, (22) any doctrinal “distinctive,” (23) and any teaching that would exclude other denominations or even other religions from being enthusiastically embraced. (24) As he himself says, “The last thing I want is to get into auseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right....” (25) Even truth itself is presented as a concept too complicated for most people to understand.

[One] other issue is absolute truth.... The levels of complexity are so deep that a lot of people have no idea what they’re talking about.... Sometime the words absolute truth mean for people that they never have to give a second thought. I believe that to be a human being, although we can know truth, we are never in a position where we shouldn’t stand open to the possibility of correction. When people use the word truth, they can mean a lot of different things.... But when you use a word like this, you’re entering into a philosophical discussion that has been around since the time of the Greeks and is a very profound, difficult, sophisticated discussion. (26)

Ironically, in his most recent book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren asserts that there are certain areas of doctrine on which he will speak clearly. He explains,

In one of my previous books, I said that clarity is sometimes overrated and that intrigue is correspondingly undervalued. But here I want to say—clearly—that it is tragic for anyone, specially anyone affiliated with the religion named after Jesus, not to be clear about what Jesus’ message actually was. (27)

Throughout the rest of *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren presents Jesus’ Kingdom message in a way that most closely aligns with the non-eschatological, social activism of twentieth-century liberalism. But such an understanding hardly accounts for many of the clear NT statements as to the true essence of the gospel message (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Moreover, by asserting that this “secret message” has just recently been discovered, McLaren is forced to deal with the question, Why hasn’t this reading arisen sooner? (28) A refutation of McLaren’s reasons (which are ultimately unconvincing) are outside the scope of this article, but the following point remains: By overturning the historic understanding of Scripture with a new, secret message of Jesus, McLaren has again undermined the clarity of Scripture. Only a Bible that is impossibly ambiguous can fit in McLaren’s neo-gnostic model.

3. McLaren and Propositional Truth

McLaren dismisses propositional truth statements as a valid way for understanding the Bible. By

denying the correspondence theory of truth, and instead embracing the approach of Leslie Newbigin (29)—that there really is no difference between facts and assumptions—McLaren and his colleagues are essentially driven to a place where no objective truth is possible (or at least possible to know definitively) and where any opinion is as good as any other.

McLaren is not the first evangelical to attempt this. In his 1993 book, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, Stanley J. Grenz sets out a similar premise, in which “we as evangelicals [should] not view theology merely as the restatement of a body of propositional truths” (30) as we engage “in the quest for truth.” (31) Because any one understanding of doctrine may be incorrect, as a model of understanding reality, even when “informed by Scripture and by the mileposts of theological history—we must maintain a stance of openness to other models, being aware of the tentativeness and incompleteness of all such systems.” (32) According to Grenz, propositional truth statements are the outmoded garments of modernism, which—like last year’s clothing styles—desperately need to be discarded.

The problem with evangelical propositionalism is its often under-developed understanding of how the cognitive dimension functions within the larger whole of revelation. Therefore evangelical theologians tend to misunderstand the social nature of theological discourse. More than its advocates have cared to admit, evangelical theology has been the captive of the orientation to the individual knower that has reigned over the Western mindset throughout the modern era. But this orientation is now beginning to lose its grip. Therefore, if our theology is to speak the biblical message in our contemporary situation, we must shed the cloak of modernity and reclaim the more profound community outlook in which the biblical people of God were rooted. (33)

Such statements may satisfy postmodern philosophers, but they do little to promote any confidence in the clarity of Scripture. In fact, they do exactly the opposite—making room for a type of biblical interpretation in which anyone’s view is as good as anyone else’s. Practically speaking, such subjectivism poses a very serious threat. As Al Mohler rightly observes,

The Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity. Unwilling to affirm that the Bible contains propositional truths that form the framework for Christian belief, this movement argues that we can have Christian symbolism and substance without those thorny questions of truthfulness that have so vexed the modern mind. The worldview of postmodernism—complete with an epistemology that denies the possibility of or need for propositional truth—affords the movement an opportunity to hop, skip and jump throughout the Bible and the history of Christian thought in order to take whatever pieces they want from one theology and attach them, like doctrinal post-it notes, to whatever picture they would want to draw. (34)

McLaren and his emergent associates deny allegations of relativism. (35) But, “although McLaren renounces relativism . . . , it is not clear when and how he would fight for the truth over against error.” (36) Practically speaking, then, his system embraces such doctrinal and hermeneutical subjectivism that, essentially, any view is accepted—as long as it shows tolerance to other views within the confines of dialogue. In order to keep the conversation going, this subjectivism begins with a denial that Scripture is clear and that what it says is authoritative for faith and practice.

That is in keeping with its postmodern premise. The one essential, nonnegotiable demand that postmodernism makes of everyone is this: No one is supposed to think he or she knows any objective truth. Because postmodernists often suggest that every opinion should be shown equal

respect, it seems (on the surface) to be driven by a broad-minded concern for harmony and tolerance, which sounds very charitable and altruistic. But what really underlies the postmodernist belief system is an utter intolerance for every worldview that makes any universal truthclaims—particularly biblical Christianity.

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 (Exodus 20:3–6; cf. 20:23; 23:24; 34:14; Leviticus 19:4; Joshua 23:7; 2 Kings 17:35). (37)

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, “[B]ut 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 as the only true way to heaven, and all other belief-systems as 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.” (38) 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.” (39) Later he says,

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. (40)

In light of his apparent openness to non-Christian faiths, (41) that he finds all broadly Christian religions also to be equally valid is not surprising. 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 that? 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? (42)

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 one writer,

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 Thessalonians 1:9). . . . Insofar as McLaren confuses the issue of false worship, he confuses something of vital importance to the God of Scripture. (43)

Only by turning a blind eye to the Bible’s clear teaching, can anyone entertain with any enthusiasm the broad ecumenism of McLaren.

5. McLaren and Conservative Evangelicals

McLaren strongly criticizes those who believe in clear interpretation of the Bible. The criticism most sharply addresses 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),” (44) and describes systematic theologies as “conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument” which demonstrate the “arrogant intellectualizing” of modern evangelicals. (45) He denounces those who hold, with any conviction, to “a foundationalist epistemology,” (46) biblical inerrancy, (47) or the solas of the Reformation. (48) 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.” (49) He negatively describes those who believe that the Bible presents clear propositional truth statements, which can be believed and defended with certainty, as those who “claim (overtly, covertly, or unconsciously) to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever” (50) and who “claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall.” (51) Near the beginning of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren admits,

[Y]ou 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. (52)

But the reason for the rub is much deeper than merely McLaren's reaction 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.

[W]hat 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. (53)

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. (54) 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 (Isaiah 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. (55)

Concluding Remarks Regarding Brian McLaren

No doubt, some will find the above analysis unfair or unloving. But with Brian McLaren and his collaborators at Emergent, much more is at stake 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, a saving comprehension of the gospel becomes impossible. 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: "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." (56)

For those who share "the love of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:10), and who are committed to "guard what has been entrusted" to them (1 Timothy 6:20), no room remains 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. (Galatians 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 Peter 3:16).

A Brief Defense and Explanation of Perspicuity

The doctrine of biblical clarity, the perspicuity of Scripture, pervades the pages of God's Word. Scripture describes itself as that which gives light (Psalm 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19a), is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16-17), explains salvation (2 Timothy 3:15b), addresses common people (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:37; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1), can be understood by children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 3:14-15), and should be used to test the validity of religious ideas (Acts 17:11; cf. 2 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). It is the truth (John 17:17) which sets men free (John 8:31-32).

Moreover, the Bible claims to be the very Word of God. Over 2,000 times in the Old Testament alone, the assertion is made that God spoke what is written within its pages. From the beginning (Genesis 1:3) to the end (Malachi 4:3) and continually throughout, this is what Old Testament Scripture asserts about itself.

The phrase "the Word of God" also occurs over 40 times in the New Testament. It is equated with the Old Testament (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31; 6:2). It was the Word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the Word Paul preached on his first (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35, 36), second (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11), and third missionary journeys (Acts 19:10). It was what James commanded his readers to apply (James 1:22), and what Peter, John, and Jude condemned the false teachers for twisting and obscuring (cf. 2 Peter 3:16; 2 John 9; Jude 4). Both the OT prophets and NT apostles took the inspired writings of Scripture seriously, because they understood them to be the very Word of God.

What does all this have to do with biblical clarity? Simply this: In Scripture, the person of God and the Word of God are everywhere interrelated, so much so that whatever is true about the character of God is true about the nature of God's Word. Thus, to deny the clarity of Scripture is to call into question God's ability to communicate clearly. But by affirming the fact that the Bible's message is inherently understandable, the doctrine of perspicuity rightly acknowledges that the Spirit of God has revealed divine truth in a comprehensible form.

It is because "the words of Scripture are objectively God's revelation, [that] one person can point to the content of the Bible in seeking to demonstrate to another what the correct understanding is." (57) Moreover, because God's revelation is clear,

Scripture can be and is read with profit, with appreciation and with transformative results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture's concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. It displays a progressively more specific identification of that story, culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about. (58)

This does not mean that the Bible is without "some things hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). The doctrine of perspicuity does not demand that every Bible passage be equally straightforward or equally simple as to its precise meaning. Sometimes correct understanding requires comparing one passage with another. As Augustine wrote,

Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere. (59)

Nor does it negate the necessity of interpretation, explanation, and exposition by Bible teachers (cf. Luke 24:27; Acts 8:30-31). In fact, a primary qualification for the NT elder is his ability to teach the Scriptures (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9).

So what then is meant by the clarity of Scripture? Larry Pettegrew, in his helpful article, identifies at least eight aspects of this orthodox Christian doctrine. (60)

First, it means that Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by. Psalm 19:7b notes, "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple." In contrast to the insecure and wavering notions of men, the Word of the living God is sure, meaning immovable and reliable. The Word then provides a foundation on which life and eternal destiny can be built without hesitation. Psalm 119:130 echoes the fact that "The unfolding of Thy words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." Wayne Grudem comments, "Here the 'simple' person (Heb. *peti*) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God's Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it." (61) Robert Reymond explains,

For example, one does not need to be 'learned,' when reading the Gospels or hearing them read or proclaimed, to discover that they intend to teach that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, performed mighty miracles, died on the cross 'as a ransom for many,' and rose from the dead on the

third day after death. These things are plain, lying on the very face of the Gospels. (62)

Second, on the other hand, perspicuity means that the Bible is deep enough for readers of the highest intellectual ability. As R. A. Torrey wrote one hundred years ago,

The Bible is unfathomable. Whatever man has produced, man can exhaust, but no man, no generation of men, not all the tens of thousands of men together that have devoted their best abilities and the best years of their lives to the study of this book, have been able to exhaust this book. Men of the best minds that the world has ever known, men of widest culture, men of rarest intellectual grasp, men of keenest insight and profoundest ability have dug into the book for years and years, and the more they dig, the deeper they saw the depth still below them to be and the richer the golden ore. (63)

Thomas Scott, who preceded Torrey, similarly noted, “The things that are absolutely necessary to salvation, are few, simple, and obvious to the meanest capacity, provided it be attended by a humble teachable disposition: but the most learned, acute, and diligent student cannot, in the longest life, obtain an entire knowledge of this one volume.” (64)

Third, perspicuity means that Scripture is clear in essential matters. Scripture, “in any faithful translation, is sufficiently perspicuous (clear) to show us our sinfulness, the basic facts of the gospel, what we must do if we are to be part of the family of God, and how to live.”⁶⁵ That is to say that the good news of salvation is clear. The message of verses like John 3:16 and Rom 3:23 is not hopelessly complex, but is lucid and straightforward so that God can rightly hold men accountable to it.

Fourth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that the obscurity that a reader of the Bible may find in some parts of Scripture is the fault of finite and sinful mankind. Grudem explains,

In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the Gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying anything like this: “I see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject.” Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. Again and again he answers questions with statements like, “Have you not read . . .” (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:14; 22:31), “Have you never read in the Scriptures . . .” (Matthew 21:42), or even, “You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29; cf. Matthew 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.). (66)

The blame must not be on the Scriptures themselves, but upon finite, sinful man.

Fifth, perspicuity means that interpreters of Scripture must use ordinary means. Because the Holy Spirit used ordinary men to communicate His message through the normal means of grammar and syntax, biblical interpreters must seek to understand that message via the same means. Thus, “if an interpreter properly follows what has been called ‘the laws of language,’ or ‘the rights of language,’ he can know what the Scriptures specifically mean.” (67)

Sixth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that even an unsaved person can understand the plain

teachings of Scripture on an external level. Though he may not submit to the teaching of Scripture or understand its true significance, he is able to comprehend the gospel message. A passage like 1 Cor 2:14 does not teach that unbelievers cannot understand any part of the Bible, but rather that they cannot properly appreciate and apply it without the illumination of the Spirit. As a matter of fact, unsaved man “will be judged for rejecting that which Scripture itself declares should be abundantly clear to them, because they refuse to receive it.” (68) Reymond writes,

One does not need to be instructed by a preacher to learn that he must believe on Jesus in order to be saved from the penalty his sins deserve. (This includes the unbeliever, who is certainly capable of following an argument.) All one needs to do in order to discover these things, to put it plainly, is to sit down in a fairly comfortable chair, open the Gospels, and with a good reading lamp, read the Gospels like he would read any other book. (69)

Seventh, perspicuity means that the Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of Scripture if he is to understand the significance of Scripture. This is the correct understanding of 1 Corinthians 2:14.

Finally, the perspicuity of Scripture means that in accordance with the priesthood of the believer, every Christian has both the privilege and the responsibility to read and interpret the Bible for himself, so that his faith rests on the authority of Scripture and not the authority of the church or any other institution. There are no church officers, class of clergy members, or Bible expositors to whose interpretation of the Scriptures lay Christians are required to submit as a final authority.

To summarize,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for Salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them. (70)

A Final Word

The doctrine of biblical perspicuity is critical to the life and mission of the church. If believers cannot know with any degree of assurance that they are accurately understanding God’s Word, they have no hope of rightly applying divine instruction in their everyday lives. A Bible that is ambiguous can produce only doctrine that is equally indefensible, since no sure argument can be made from any given text. But this is not how the Scripture describes itself. All men are responsible to submit to Scripture. And all believers are commanded to know, defend, and apply sound doctrine. Biblical clarity provides the foundation for such a mandate.

The Bible not only sets forth its own clarity in such a way that men are held accountable for what it says (Romans 1:18–2:16; cf. Deuteronomy 11:28; 28:62; Judges 6:10; 1 Samuel 12:15; Jeremiah 3:25; 44:23; Daniel 9:11). It also explains why false teachers would want to obscure the plainness of the message. Jesus Himself rightly diagnosed the reason people reject the clarity of Scripture when He said,

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than

the light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:19-21)

And Paul would later write, of those who are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7), that they were “lovers of self” (2 Timothy 3:2), “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:4), who possessed “a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). Denying Scripture’s clarity is a convenient escape from the responsibility to obey God’s very clear commands and a provision for guilt-free sin. Rather than listening to the folly of such men, Paul encouraged Timothy with these words:

[A]nd that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

May those words continue to ring true in the hearts of all who know the Lord and love His Word.

(1) D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)

(2) Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 22.

(3) “About Emergent Village.” Online at: emergentvillage.org/about/, accessed August 8, 2006.

(4) Driscoll, *Confessions* 21.

(5) Albert Mohler, “What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part One” Al Mohler’s Weblog (June 29, 2005),
online at: albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-06-29, accessed Sep. 26, 2006.

(6) Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 38.

(7) Online at time.com/time/covers/1101050207/photoessay, accessed August 8, 2006.

(8) Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 25-29.

(9) Greg Warner, “Brian McLaren,” *FaithWorks* magazine, Online at:
faithworks.com/archives/brian_mclaren.htm archives/brian_mclaren.htm, accessed August 8, 2006.

(10) “Religion and Ethics,” *Newsweek* Episode no. 846 (PBS television, July 15, 2005), Online at:
pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/interview.html , accessed August 8, 2006.

(11) Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 22-23.

(12) *Ibid.*, 19-20.

(13) Ibid., 296.

(14) Ibid., 261.

(15) Ibid., 293-94.

(16) Brian McLaren, "Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response" (Jan 23, 2006), Leadership Journal Blog, Online at: blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html, accessed August 8, 2006.

(17) Doug Wilson, "All About Sex," Blog and Mablog (Jan. 25, 2006), Online at: dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=1895, accessed August 8, 2006.

(18) McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* 100.

(19) Ibid.

(20) Ibid., 159-60.

(21) Ibid., 81.

(22) Ibid., 74.

(23) Ibid., 19.

(24) Ibid., 113-14.

(25) Ibid., 19.

(26) Brian McLaren, Relevant Magazine Interview, Online at: relevantmagazine.com/beta/issue_21_missingpointB.php/beta/issue_21_missingpointB.php, accessed August 8, 2006. For more on McLaren's sevenfold definition of truth, see "An Open Letter to Chuck Colson," December 2003, brianmclaren.net/archives/000018.html, accessed August 8, 2006.

(27) Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006) 7.

(28) Ibid., 211.

(29) Newbigin put forth these ideas most clearly in *The Gospel in Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

(30) Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1993) 79. Grenz's other books such as *A Primer on Postmodernism*, *Theology for the Community of God*, and *Beyond Foundationalism* establish the same premises.

(31) *Ibid.* It should also be noted that McLaren has been very upfront about the significant impact that Stanley Grenz had on him through both his writings and his personal friendship.

(32) *Ibid.*, 84.

(33) *Ibid.*, 73.

(34) Albert Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy—Is It Orthodox?" *Al Mohler's Weblog* (June 20, 2005), online at: crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?adate=6/20/2005, accessed August 8, 2006.

(35) See *A Generous Orthodoxy* 285-86.

(36) John M. Frame, "Review of Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*," *Act 3 Review* 14/3 (2005):97-105.

(37) Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

(38) McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* 35.

(39) *Ibid.*, 257-58.

(40) *Ibid.*, 264. McLaren continues this broadly ecumenical theme in *The Secret Message of Jesus* 4-8.

(41) McLaren attempts to explain away allegations that his views represent "a complete reconsideration of Christian missions" (Albert Mohler, "Generous Orthodoxy" crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?adate=2/16/2005, accessed August 8, 2006) by saying, "I am not saying that followers of Jesus should remain loyal to all the doctrines or practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, or whatever. I'm saying they should 'remain within their ... contexts.' Because of recent U.S. foreign policy and the sometimes careless religious rhetoric of some of our political and religious leaders, along with our country's export of a lot of filth (pornography, etc.)—today in many countries to be identified with 'the Christian religion' is to be identified with U.S. military aggression, religious bigotry, and moral degeneration. I can't blame people for wanting to avoid association with those things, since I myself

do
not want to be associated with them.... This awareness—that people can be identified as Christ-followers
without having to endorse everything associated with the word ‘Christian’—is widespread in the
missions
community, and has been an accepted methodology among missiologists for a long time” (Brian McLaren,
“Would You Please Clarify This Paragraph in A Generous Orthodoxy,” online at:
brianmclaren.net/archives/2005/05/would_you_please_clarify_this_paragraph_in_generous_orthodoxy_237.html,
accessed August 8, 2006. But such explanations fail to account convincingly for all that McLaren
asserts
in A Generous Orthodoxy and his other writings, beginning with his deemphasis on correct doctrine
and his
redefinition
of the gospel message.

(42) Ibid., 66.

(43) Frame, “Review of A Generous Orthodoxy” 104-5.

(44) McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* 195.

(45) Ibid., 151-52.

(46) Ibid., 117.

(47) Ibid., 159-60, 164.

(48) Ibid., 198.

(49) Ibid.

(50) Ibid., 286.

(51) Ibid., 293.

(52) Ibid., 35.

(53) Ibid., 258-59.

(54) Ibid.

(55) Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 168.

- (56) D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant* 186.
- (57) Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 279.
- (58) James Patrick Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001) 9.
- (59) Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958) 38.
- (60) Larry D. Pettegrew, "The Perspicuity of Scripture," *TMSJ* 15/2 (Fall 2004):209-25.
- (61) Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 106.
- (62) Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 88.
- (63) R.A. Torrey, *The Divine Origin of the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899) 38.
- (64) Thomas Scott, "Preface to Thomas Scott's Commentary on the Bible." This preface, first published in 1804, was often placed in the front of Bibles, as an introduction to the text.
- (65) Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 128.
- (66) Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 106.
- (67) Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 98.
- (68) Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics" 123.
- (69) Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* 88.
- (70) Second London Confession of Faith, 1,7.

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