

# L'Abri

INTERNATIONAL



## The Emerging Challenge to Biblical Authority

Jock McGregor

**What is the Emergent Church? Started in the late 90's by pastors Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt, the movement is a widely diverse and creative network that is still evolving and reflects a great many innovative insights.**

According to [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com), the emerging church is a loose network of churches and Christian leaders 'in dialogue' about what it means to do theology, missions and church in a world where a postmodern culture has emerged from Modernity. It has proved amazingly influential. There are now Emergent networks in many other countries, and *Time Magazine* recently listed McLaren as one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals.

"One reason why the movement has mushroomed so quickly," writes D.A. Carson in *Becoming Conversant with the*

*Emergent Church* (Zondervan, 2005), "is that it is bringing to focus a lot of hazy perceptions already widely circulating in the culture" (13). More specifically, the movement has successfully tapped into a widespread *zeitgeist* among disaffected evangelical youth and those persuaded by the postmodern paradigm.

It has also, however, been somewhat controversial. Don Carson and R. Scott Smith (*Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, Crossway, 2005) have written concerned responses. Already one of the early founding members of the movement, Mark Driscoll, has distanced himself, noting his concern that evangelical theology, and not just evangelical church practice, was now being revised. Furthermore, the word *emerging* is now becoming

widespread in Christian circles but is often used simply as a synonym for postmodern.

The best way to get to the heart of the Emergent movement is to look at the writings of McLaren, widely acknowledged as its leading voice. Though his *A New Kind of Christian* (2001) raised important questions about the postmodern cultural shift, his clearest exposition of Emergent thinking is *A Generous Orthodoxy* (2004).

### Generous Orthodoxy

McLaren is as provocative as he is winsome. Indeed, as he himself acknowledges, what he has written is not so much a theological statement as a personal confession: a passionate call to the Church to a new kind

LETTER TO THE  
L'ABRI FAMILY

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Dear Friends,

Welcome to the first issue of the new digital L'Abri International Newsletter!

We could list several reasons for the change ... saving costs, keeping up with the times ... but most important is the chance to bring out the newsletter more frequently. Now three times a year you can expect to find a new issue here as a link on our website, and old issues will be available in the marked archive.

You will notice the newsletter is now only four pages long. From now on each issue will feature a new article and a brief update from all the L'Abri branches in the Family Letter section. The shorter format allows for comfortable on-screen reading or easy printing. In this issue we are glad to have Jock McGregor's important assessment of a current trend in the emerging church movement.

As usual, all the articles have been adapted from recorded lectures and workshops. The titles are referenced at the end of each article. If you would like a more full treatment of the topic, we would recommend you order the lecture directly from a local branch or from the catalogue at Sound Word Associates ([www.soundword.com](http://www.soundword.com)).

If you have any questions, comments or tips, feel free to contact the editors at [labri@labri.nl](mailto:labri@labri.nl). We look forward to hearing from you!

Blessings,

The L'Abri Workers

of faithfulness in a new cultural context. What drives him is a strong concern about postmodern sensitivities to Christian hypocrisy and the abuse of power - especially the use of Truth as an excuse for domination.

It is clear that McLaren and others in the movement are deeply moved by this postmodern generation, so suspicious of the conservative Evangelical Church in the United States. A *Generous Orthodoxy* was written primarily for - as he puts it - "Christians who are about to leave ... and seekers who are attracted to Jesus, but don't feel there's room for them in what is commonly called Christianity unless they swallow a lot of additional stuff" (44). Though concerned to reach these postmoderns, McLaren is himself also clearly disillusioned by what he sees as imperialistic attitudes in evangelicals infatuated with power. So Emergents are also seeking to reform what appears to them to be a compromised Christianity, to help the Church 'emerge' from its captivity to modernism.

What will this new Church look like? In a nutshell, it will be marked by a more generous orthodoxy. McLaren sums up the emergent way as "the way of Jesus, which is the way of love and the way of embrace" (326). This important concept of embrace is threefold: McLaren wants us to "embrace the other" in a missional compassion to those outside the Church; to "embrace each other" in a more ecumenical, "post-Protestant" spirit of working together; and to "embrace tradition" by looking for guidance and insight from the various practices of the collective Christian tradition. In short, the Emergent Church will reject an exclusivist, absolutist orthodoxy and seek a more embracing, open-minded and open-hearted orthodoxy.

### Postmodern

In many ways, few Christians would disagree with McLaren's basic passion to replace an attitude of self-righteousness with a generous embrace. Similarly, no one would want to defend the ultra-sectarian Christianity he criticizes, and all will affirm his call for the Evangelical Church to become more Christ-like toward others. But he is not simply calling for a change in attitude. In McLaren's particular theological proposals, he is calling for a deeper change, and here a certain problem arises. To be clear, the problem does not lie in any of the specific innovations he mentions (respect for tradition,

incarnational living, narrative interpretation, and so on) but in the underlying philosophical analysis of the culture and the resultant theological restructuring.

Understanding the shift from modernism to postmodernism is important here. In modernism, which has dominated western thought since the Enlightenment, the human power of reason is seen as the path to truth. Rejecting religion and any authoritative revelation, the modern project sought to restructure society on a rational, scientific foundation. Postmodernism, popular since the 70's, critiques these absolutist pretensions. Truth is seen as relative to the knower and hopelessly compromised by one's cultural context. Absolute truth is impossible to know, and the quest for "truth" is really a quest for power.

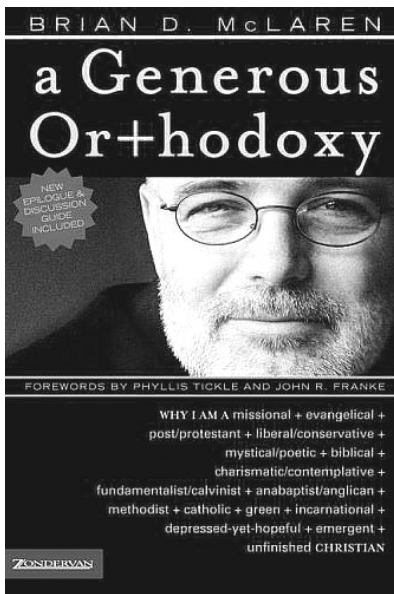
The postmodern rejection of absolutes has been widely discussed in Evangelical circles. While no evangelicals want to endorse modernism, many are suspicious of postmodernism. But according to Emergents, Evangelicalism has inherited a modernist absolutism, and only Postmodernism can provide the cure. Though not a total relativist, McLaren sees the postmodern critique of modernist views of truth as the way to-

*In the Bible we find help in knowing what we should or should not approve, even while practicing a generous embrace*

ward a more humble, seeking and embracing Christianity.

McLaren and many Emergents follow the postmodern script. At every turn, concerns for propositional truth (making declarative statements about what is true to reality), defending truth claims and distinguishing truth from error are cast in a negative, modernist light. They are contrasted with doing good, embracing others and holding all our convictions tentatively at best. McLaren cannot entirely avoid questions of truth, however, and he is committed to a creedal Christianity, based on certain state-





ments of belief. What he fails to show is how we decide on these doctrinal matters or how we defend them. A generous and open spirit is wonderful and necessary, but it does not itself go very far when these difficult judgments must be made.

### Sola Scriptura

Evangelicals have traditionally turned to the Bible as a welcome authority in such difficult moments. McLaren intends to remain biblical, but he means something very different from the position orthodox Christianity has held. The sections in *A Generous Orthodoxy* on Scripture are some of the most troubling. McLaren begins by claiming that evangelicals have held a “dictation” view of the Bible and failed to recognize its nuances. Instead he proposes a “narrative” understanding of Scripture.

Though there is merit to such a suggestion, there are two problems: the inaccurate, straw-man depiction of the evangelical understanding of Scripture and the accompanying diminishing of a propositional understanding of truth. In short, McLaren wants to remove the *Sola* from the classical Reformational commitment to Scripture *alone*, and to elevate, as in the Catholic and liberal traditions, the authority of Tradition, Reason and Experience alongside the Bible. Furthermore, McLaren wants the Bible to be interpreted in dialogue with missionary praxis and even with other religions.

McLaren does not approach Scripture as a solution to postmodern problems. Rather, the evangelical view of an authoritative Scripture is seen as part of the problem. By contrast, Francis Schaeffer saw the Bible as a wonderful, God-given solution to precisely these epistemological problems that Postmodernism has uncovered. Schaeffer taught – just as postmodernism does – that Enlightenment humanism, or modernism, could indeed give us no certainty or absolutes of truth.

But unlike the postmoderns, Schaeffer declared that we need not despair of truth. God’s Word can still give us certainty, precisely because it is God’s Word and not just the word of humans. In the Bible we have a source for Truth that can guide us through the difficult judgments we need to make. We are not perfect and should not pretend to be beyond correction, but the standard of God’s authoritative revelation remains – we are called by God to be faithful to it. Here we can find help in knowing just what we should or should not approve, even while practicing a generous embrace.

### Anti-foundationalism

So why does McLaren not turn to the Bible? Here we must see the Emergent movement in its context. More than initiating new ideas, it is a reflection of the radical ideas of others. Leaders in the Emergent movement clearly and openly draw heavily from sources such as Stanley Grenz (late of Regent College), John R. Franke (Biblical Theological Seminary), and Nancey Murphy (Fuller Theological Seminary).

What groups these sources together? They represent a wing of evangelical scholars who consider themselves “post-conservative” and “anti-foundationalist” – meaning they have for a large part accommodated postmodern views. They claim that Evangelicals have been so captive to modernist thinking that their understanding of the Bible has been compromised. In other words, the evangelical view of the Bible as an authoritative, propositional revelation is a product of modernism, not orthodox theology.

The problem here is a loose use of the term “foundationalism”. Most philosophers and theologians, conservative or liberal, reject Enlightenment Foundationalism – also called Cartesian foundationalism – as wrong. Rene Descartes tried to build a sys-

tem of certain knowledge based on a “foundation” of indubitable truth which no one could deny. He chose the maxim, “I think, therefore I am,” as such a starting point. Since then many have rejected this attempt: philosophers have seen it as flawed, theologians have seen it as humanistic.

But Nancey Murphy, in her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (1996), argues that conservative Evangelicals have bought into such Foundationalism, because they want to make the Bible a foundation for theology. Though the parallel is in my view incredibly far-fetched, Murphy’s view has been very influential. Since Foundationalism has been widely rejected, we must then revise

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the orthodox view of Scripture. Stanley Grenz built his entire theological proposal around this idea.

We must reject all ideas of building theology on such foundations and instead think in terms of “webs of beliefs” which do not necessarily correspond to an external reality but do cohere internally. The “anti-foundationalist” rejects a “correspondence” view of truth – that it refers to external realities – and replaces it with a “coherentist” or “communitarian” view, where something is true if it is consistent with the other beliefs of a particular community.

### The Bible

In theological terms, this means adding tradition and experience to the Bible to create a web of beliefs that mutually and coherently support each other. There can be

no identified authoritative “foundation” since there can be no privileged position or “God’s-eye-view”. The Bible may be important as a source document that shapes our tradition, and within a tradition, it may be authoritative. But it has no necessary relation to external reality and therefore offers no help to judge between traditions.

In this view, truth is simply the beliefs held by members of a given community. It is no longer possible to describe reality beyond that level or to find absolute, transcendent truth. McLaren does not go into all this philosophical background in detail, but he is clearly impacted by these ideas. He names Grenz in *A Generous Orthodoxy* as a “mentor and friend” whose “thinking helped inspire the idea and shape of this book,” and John Franke makes the connection clear in the foreword.

Having noted “the emergence of postmodern theory with its critique of certain, objective universal knowledge,” Franke explains that the title of the book is a borrowed phrase:

*“Yale theologian Hans Frei sought to move beyond the liberal/conservative impasse of modernity and coined the term a generous orthodoxy to describe an understanding of Christianity that contained elements of both liberal and conservative thought ... This entailed the rejection of philosophical foundationalism characteristic in both liberal and conservative theology ... Conservatives looked to an error-free Bible as the incontrovertible foundation of their theology ... ‘Post-liberals’ and ‘post-conservatives’ have sought to move in the direction suggested by generous orthodoxy through a non-foundationalist conception of the Christian faith ... While this conversation continues to proceed and develop in the academy, its real significance lies in its implication for the church ... Brian D. McLaren has provided a model for those who are seeking to develop, nurture and practice a postmodern, ecumenical and missional Christian faith” (14-16).*

Here it is clear why McLaren does not hold to *sola Scriptura*. Because of these roots in anti-foundationalism, the authority of the Bible both for McLaren and the whole Emergent church can only get weaker.

## Orthodoxy

By contrast, for conservative evangelicals who hold to a traditional orthodoxy, the Bible remains the bedrock of truth. Obviously the Bible is not to take the place of God, but it is nevertheless an extraordinarily precious, supernaturally transcendent, “lamp unto our feet and a light for our path”

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(Psalm 119:110). It does not provide a foundation in the Cartesian sense. In the best biblical sense, however, it is the only sure source of truth we have. We may not have a God’s-eye-view ourselves, but we do have God’s point of view, written and revealed.

Interpreters do differ, but starting from a common infallible source allows truth – even absolute, unchanging truth – to become increasingly clarified. It enables us to make the difficult judgments necessary for life and goodness to prosper. It enables us to uncover and resist the lies that threaten to lead us astray. Exclusivity and absolutes may be hard and unpopular concepts, but they are entailed by this gift of truth.

At the same time, contrary to McLaren’s claim, exclusivity and absolutes do not entail a lessening of a call to embrace. Indeed, the Bible is our best friend in this matter, as it establishes love of neighbor as just such an absolute and it requires us to exclude hatred and enmity from our thinking and actions. McLaren is right to condemn Absolutism and Exclusivism, but he is wrong to throw out absolutes and exclusivity in the process. The gift of God’s revelation is that we mere mortals can come to know – partially but truly – an unchanging and uncompromising truth. A truth that God Himself tells us can set us free.

Of course, we can sinfully wield this truth in absolutist and exclusionary ways that

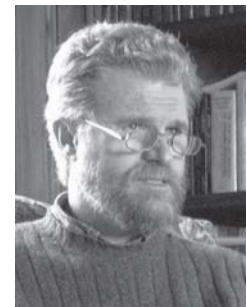
fail to respect or embrace in love those who differ from us. But to despise the gift itself out of a misguided and false humility is foolishness of the highest order. When one encounters someone else wandering in the dark, the improper way to wield a flashlight is to shine it directly in their eyes, blinding them. The solution is not to throw away the flashlight, consigning both parties to a blind embrace in the darkness.

Rather we wield the flashlight redemptively, coming alongside the lost, embracing them and shining the light at our feet. Then we are enabled to see the path and walk together, both in true humility, dependent on the light. The focus is never on who is right or who has the light. The focus is on the fact that there is a light, even in the midst of darkness – “the true light that gives light to every man” has indeed come into the world.

The sad irony of *A Generous Orthodoxy* is that it is not really very generous at all. Traditional orthodoxy is life-giving precisely because it points to the Giver of life, who has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Scriptures. Simon Peter’s confession remains crucial: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). If we rob those words of their clarity, their absolute truthfulness, we rob them of their power. God’s Word is a precious gift we can and must share with others. Water it down and what we end up giving people may be more palatable, but it will be worth a lot less.

Postmoderns may prefer a generous-sounding orthodoxy to classical orthodoxy, but if its light is dimmed and its power to save is muted, then it will not prove to have been such a generous gift after all.

*Based on the lecture, “The Emerging Challenge to Biblical Authority” by Jock McGregor*



*Jock McGregor works at Rochester L’Abri*

# To the Praying Family ...

Dear Friends of L'Abri and visitors to the L'Abri website,

Welcome! A welcome letter on our website is something new for us, as an introductory letter to “unknown” folk has never been a part of our fifty (plus!) year history. But, of course, the internet was not even a dream that many years ago. Thus we are embarking on an effort to renew our communication with the wider L'Abri family and also with those who are visiting for the first time.

Though L'Abri started over 50 years ago in the Swiss Alps, there are now seven branches of L'Abri in Europe, North America and Asia, each located in a beautiful and unique setting. As students come from around the world, we encourage them to participate fully in the life of the community and to enter into all that we do. From Switzerland to Korea and all the other five branches inbetween, there is an international mix of people and backgrounds with a variety of personal issues and questions. You will find that the families of the L'Abri workers are also very much an integral part of the community. Sometimes living together can be difficult at first, but there is also much laughter and joy. You may want to check out the individual links on the website as the different branches have posted much information relevant only to their site – and even though the locales differ greatly, we feel bound together in something Francis Schaeffer liked to call a ‘unique bundle of life.’ In each new newsletter we will be giving updates on two or three of those different bundles – this time a word from the Dutch L'Abri and the Rochester L'Abri.

It's been a busy time for L'Abri in Holland. In Eck en Wiel the team has been happy to welcome lots of international and local guests. A wider range of ages and countries than usual has made for a particularly colorful time. The theme weekends – especially those focusing on films – remain an important part of the work. Though intense they are a blessing to the whole group. The weekly lecture and film nights in Utrecht have also seen a good mix of regulars and new faces. The properties have also undergone some much needed repairs, particularly roof work on the house in Utrecht and the chapel in Eck en Wiel – not an easy task in rainy country!

Wim and Greta continue to lead the work from Utrecht. Wim is also in his fourth year of working in the Christian political party there, an important position for the city but also a great source of new insights and challenges for the work. Henk and Riana are enjoying having Henk's parents in the area, who have returned to Holland for their retirement. On the other hand, Riana lost her mother last summer after a long battle with cancer. We were glad Riana was able to make several trips home before her mother died. Beryl continues the brave work of being a single worker and has blessed the branch greatly with her work on the finances. Robb and Christa are staying busy with young children, having recently added a fourth: new son Gido.



The barn library at Dutch L'Abri



Gardening at work time!

In Rochester we have also had a busy and productive winter season. We began our term with an Arts Weekend in September with John Hodges as our speaker and with local artists displaying their artwork and crafts. The film nights that have continued throughout the year are held on Tuesdays, while our lectures for students and public are on Fridays. On November 5, a one-day L'Abri conference was held on the Iowa State University campus, with about 100 attending. Throughout the academic year there has also been a monthly L'Abri lecture at St Olaf College in Northfield. L'Abri is also involved in a joint ministry with our local church that provides meals and Bible studies for medical students at the Mayo Clinic every Thursday evening. Early this year Jock and Alison and Sarah headed south for a very rewarding time at the St. Louis L'Abri Retreat, which they hosted from January 4-18. This is the seventh year they have hosted these retreats, one in the summer and one in the winter.

We also had the pleasure of seeing God onze again bless our annual Rochester conference at the Kahler Hotel, February 15-16. Our theme this year was **Culture and Common Grace: God's Good Gifts in All of Life**. It was a capacity crowd, and the lectures and workshops were outstanding, as well as the informal times we were able to spend with each other. For those interested in ordering recordings of the lectures and workshops, see the conference link on the main website, [www.labri.org](http://www.labri.org).

Again we want to thank all of you again for your prayer and support. Please remember to contact any of the branches at any time with your questions, or just to say hi. We'd love to hear from you!

For all the workers,  
Nancy Snyder, Rochester L'Abri