

BRIAN D. MCLAREN'S CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL

David J. Hesselgrave
Member, the Advisor Board of *Global Missiology*
Professor Emeritus, Trinity International University

Published at www.GlobalMissiology.org, January 2012

Introduction

Brian McLaren and his writings intrigue me. He reminds me of Dr. Paul Holmer, my adviser during undergraduate days as a philosophy major at the University of Minnesota. A recognized authority on Kierkegaardian and Scandinavian philosophy, Holmer later became Dean of Yale Divinity School. But while at Minnesota his quips alternatively amused and frustrated some of us believer students. We were amused when Holmer playfully accused our resident logical positivist, Herbert Feigl, of attending a church where “he could have his religion and not have it at the same time.” We were frustrated when he made disparaging references to his own upbringing in the Evangelical Mission Covenant Church.

McLaren’s writings are reminiscent of Holmer’s lectures. McLaren himself says, “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” (2004:23). Perhaps so, but though standard fare in university classrooms, these techniques have much less currency in the communication of divine truth.

Preliminaries and Limitations of this Study

Brian McLaren is founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spenceville, Maryland. An internationally acclaimed lecturer and author; he is recognized as the “father” of the Emergent Church movement and is chairman of the Emergent Village organization. The movement is by no means monolithic. Proponents diverge on a number of issues both theological and methodological. Nevertheless, the dominant voice is that of Brian McLaren so his philosophy is deserving of special attention.

This particular study will focus on missiological and contextualization issues. It is necessarily very limited. To expedite it, I will assume the faith commitments of the IFMA since all EMS members subscribe to either the IFMA Statement of Faith or a similar statement put forward by the EFMA. Primary reference will be made to three seminal works especially germane to this discussion. It will be most convenient to identify them here and reference them in the text that follows by publication dates and chapter or page numbers. The three books are:

1) Brian A. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: a Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) in which he speaks indirectly through a fictitious Dr. Neil Edward Oliver (Neo). A case can be made for saying that this popular work launched both McLaren and the Emergent Church movement to national prominence.

2) McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post-protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). In this book McLaren speaks very directly concerning both his personal beliefs and his contextualized message to emergents.

3) Edwin L. Frizen, Jr., *75 Years of IFMA 1917-1972* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992). Frizen painstakingly chronicles the history of the IFMA and catalogues eight basic belief commitments of its founders (cf. pp. 109-10). The book contains their elaboration into a full-fledged Statement of Faith (chap. 17; Appendix B).

One more thing. *For our present purpose we will think of contextualization broadly in terms of the ways in which McLaren conceives of his mission (and, by extension, ours) and proposes that the gospel be communicated by means of “new ways of believing, belonging and becoming”* (cf. 2001: inside jacket cover).

McLaren’s New “Missional Mission”

McLaren sincerely—and in some ways, correctly—feels that the basic problem facing churches and missions today and tomorrow has to do with developing a mission, message and methodology that will be understandable and appealing to emergents in our post-Christian, postmodern culture. He characterizes the modern culture now passing (i.e., “modernism,” the modern mindset) as having been one of conquest, control, critical thinking, analysis, objectivity, absolutes, individualism, consumerism, organization, Protestantism, institutional religion, and secular science. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is strongly inclined toward relativism, experientialism, noncreedalism, togetherness, harmony, belongingness, holism, experimentation and discovery. For McLaren the advent of postmodernism necessitates a re-consideration, not alone of style and strategy, but also of the Christian gospel and mission.

“Missional Mission” as Viewed by McLaren

McLaren lays claim to being a “*missional* Christian.” In fact, “missional” is the very first word used to describe his position in the subtitle of *A Generous Orthodoxy* (2004). As used by McLaren, to be “missional,” however, does not mean to be “missions-minded” in the traditional sense. Far from it, following in the train of Vincent Donovan, David Bosch and, more particularly, Darrell Guder and members of The Gospel and Our Culture Network, McLaren says that “missional” means that *the church should first reflect on its mission in the world and then allow its theology to flow out of that reflection rather than first reflecting on theology and allowing its understanding of mission to flow out of theology* (2004:105-6).

To miss this is to misunderstand McLaren's contextualization. McLaren has reflected on what the Christian mission is and what it entails. A commitment to his kind of mission/missiology radically changes the way one thinks and does both church and mission. In his view, Christian missionaries should first consider adherents of other religions to be their neighbors, and then converse and dialogue with them in ways that will enable both themselves and Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims to become "humble followers of Jesus." Depending on the circumstances, rather than inviting Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, or Muslims to become Christians, it may be advisable to help them to become "followers of Jesus" while remaining in their Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish or Muslim contexts (2004:259-60). Buddhists who "... feel so called will become *Buddhist followers of Jesus*" and they "... should be given that opportunity and invitation" (2004:264, italics mine).

"Great Commission Mission" as Viewed in the IFMA

Now compare McLaren's "missional mission" thinking with the mission thinking of the IFMA as expressed in the IFMA SOF Article #9: "*We believe that Christ commanded the Church to go into the world and preach the gospel to every person, baptizing and teaching those who believe*" (1992:436). This article reflects not only the theology of IFMA founders but also the fervent hope that their new organization would "... make possible the bearing of a united testimony to the need of a complete and speedy evangelization of the world" (1992:109).

Some challenges to conversionist mission were well known to them. Others were in the offing. But in 1917, and for the likes of Henry Frost, J. R. Schaffer, Roland Bingham, Paul Graef, Clara Masters and Frank Lange, the Christian mission was a given. It had already been unmistakably and ineluctably expressed in what Donald McGavran much later referred to as the "Great Commission mission" to go and "make disciples" as commanded by our Lord in Matthew 28:16-20.

Towards an Analysis

Let's agree with McLaren's implied criticism that missionaries sometimes tend to make converts into "cultural (westernized) Christians." That does not change the fact that his view of mission is fundamentally flawed. In the first place, missionaries are not sent so much to invite Buddhists et. al. to come to Jesus as they are to take Jesus and *his* gospel to Buddhists. Secondly, missionaries don't determine the provisions of the "invitation;" the Lord Jesus does. Thirdly, Jesus' invitation/command is not just to "follow him" but to "*Take up one's cross* and follow him."

But the fundamental problem, not only with McLaren's view of mission but also with his missiology as a whole, is not just hermeneutical. It is epistemological. Because he does not begin with biblical theology, McLaren's "*reflections on mission*" turn out to be "*refractions of mission*." Given McLaren's approach to mission/missiology, how do

we really know—how *can* we really know—what the Christian mission actually is? Or even that we Christians have a mission at all?

“New Ways of Believing”

McLaren takes aim at our IFMA/EFMA and other evangelical forebears when early on in *A New Kind of Christian* he has Neo address Inter-Varsity, Campus Crusade, Navigator and Baptist Student Union students in the following vein: “I believe that the modern version of Christianity that you have learned from your parents, your Sunday School teachers, and even your campus ministers is destined to be a medieval cathedral. It’s over, or almost over” (2001:38). In line with this dismissal of traditional evangelical beliefs, let’s examine McLaren’s “new ways of believing.”

Brian McLaren on Scripture

Concerning the authority of the Bible, McLaren says that some people look at the Bible in much the same way as medieval Catholics looked at the church and the pope—*infallible, inerrant and absolutely authoritative*. Others (such as Neo and McLaren himself--ed.) look at the Bible as a collection of ideas—*inspiring and sometimes even inspired, but not ultimately or finally authoritative*. For McLaren, the authority of the Bible does not reside in the biblical text itself but in God who “*moves mysteriously on a higher level*” than the level of the text. He notes that, in spite of the way almost all evangelicals have interpreted the passage, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not say that the Bible is inspired and therefore *authoritative*; it says that it is inspired and therefore *useful* (2001:chaps. 6 and 7; 2004: chap. 10, esp. 164-65).

The IFMA on Scripture

Contrast the foregoing with IFMA SOF Article #1: “*We believe the Bible, consisting of Old and New Testaments, is verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit, is inerrant in the original manuscripts, and is the infallible and authoritative Word of God*” (1992:435). Both the positioning and wording of this article are important. It is positioned first because Scripture is the primary source of our knowledge about God and his works, ways and will. Moreover, its wording includes three descriptors that preclude McLaren-like misunderstandings: “*inerrant,*” “*infallible*” and “*authoritative.*”

Towards an Analysis

There is much more to these “*mysterious higher level*” and “*useful only*” ideas than is immediately apparent. There is a strong tendency among even believing emergents to avoid confessional statements and doctrinal discussions. McLaren is correct in thinking that emergents are more concerned about knowing “*truth*” by virtue of experience than about “*getting the facts straight.*” But McLaren is wrong in the ways in

which his contextualization “cashes in” on biases such as these. He proposes that *spiritual experience* yields a truer knowledge of God, a higher understanding of Scripture, and a greater possibility for life-changing transformation than does a wrestling with the meaning of the biblical text itself. Hindus and Buddhists entertain similar ideas with respect to the Vedas, the Tripitaka, the Lotus Sutra and their other holy books. Japanese Buddhists, for example, speak of *montei* or a meaning “beneath the letter” of the Sutras. *As a matter of fact, both Buddhists and Hindus think of their holy books, not so much as being true or conveying truth as being utilitarian and enablers of the enlightenment experience which alone yields what we might call “true truth.”*

But to know the truth in a truly Christian sense is very, very different. For Christians, the Bible is not a *prod* to God, it is the *Word* of God! The Holy Spirit *illuminates* the teachable mind so that the biblical text can be understood, but *revelation* occurred when the Holy Spirit inspired Bible authors to *write* Scripture, not when the Holy Spirit enables readers to *discover* its truths at some deeper or higher level.

In my estimation, and insofar as “higher level knowing” and “transformational worship experiences” grow out of McLaren’s “new way of believing” and “generous orthodoxy,” they are perilously close to the “knowing” and “enlightenment experiences” of Eastern mysticism. Elaborate visual and auditory forms of stimulation reminiscent of the yantra symbols, breath exercises, focused meditation and mantra repetition common to various kinds of Yoga would be cases in point. But in Hinduism and Buddhism these resorts are unchristian to the core. Not only is this sort of experientialism misguided, these resorts are calculated to enable the adept to experience the Divine (Brahman) already imminent within the individual (as the Atman) not a transcendent and living God!

McLaren’s view of Scripture and its use impact the gospel message in other ways that can only be mentioned here. For example, IFMA SOF Article #12 says, “*We believe that the saved will be raised to everlasting life and blessedness in heaven, and that the unsaved will be raised to everlasting and conscious punishment in hell* (1992:435). McLaren, however, proposes that biblical language concerning heaven and hell is *evocative* (i.e., encouraging a certain response), *not descriptive* (i.e., not referring to actual places or states). In his view, the gospel has little or nothing to do with “getting our butt into heaven.” It’s about something beyond time and space—the “redemption of the world, the stars, the animals, the plants, the whole show” (2001: ch.11 and esp. pp.129; 2004:48-49).

Similarly, IFMA SOF Article #4 says, “*We believe that Jesus Christ . . . died vicariously, shed His blood as a substitutionary sacrifice . . .* (1992:435). McLaren, however, downgrades (though he does not entirely dismiss) the biblical doctrine of justification by the blood sacrifice of Christ on the cross. He recasts the substitutionary atonement in the mold of a “metaphor” that is attractive mainly to children and the immature. To most postmoderns, however, it is barbaric. They would prefer to understand the message of the cross in terms of justice for all peoples, and hope for all human cultures and the whole created order (2004:45-49). So would McLaren, and that’s the problem.

“New Ways of Belonging”

McLaren insists that we Christians get over any notions that distinguish between “us” and “them”—our religion and their religion, our denomination and their denomination, our church and their church, our beliefs and their beliefs. That kind of thinking will never work in a postmodern culture that espouses “tolerance,” seeks to break down barriers, wants to build bridges, and longs for togetherness with people of different colors and creeds. For McLaren, belongingness *precedes* becoming!

Brian McLaren on the Church

McLaren warns his readers not to use any of his ideas (or, we may suppose, the ideas of anyone else) in any way that might be divisive. In his view, it is repugnant to try to build an “elite club” of any kind, even an “elite generous orthodoxy club” where members “look down their long crooked noses” on those who don’t believe the way they do. He sees keeping “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” as something that must be preserved at all costs. In his view, doctrinal distinctives and “a lot of additional stuff” must not be allowed to turn away “spiritual seekers who are attracted to Jesus.” To all such people he says, “Don’t leave! Don’t give up! There’s room for you!” (2004: 39-40).

In order to make such people feel welcome in emergent services, McLaren the church should become a “community” where *everyone* belongs and participates in conversations about “predicaments” that are common to all. While the modern spirituality now passing had to do with “I” and “me,” postmodern spirituality has to do with “us” and “we.” While modern spirituality had to do with getting people into worship services where guilt was laid on them for not doing more outside the church, postmodern spirituality has to do with making the worship service itself into something where outsiders are included and then helping them to “do something now.” (2001, ch. 13) When all alike “belong” and all can contribute to the ongoing conversation, the Bible becomes a “*family storybook*” that calls *God’s family* together “. . . and helps create a community that is a catalyst for God’s working in the world” (2001: 53).

The IFMA on the Church

Article #8 of the IFMA SOF reads: “*We believe that the Church, the body of Christ, consists only of those who are born again, who are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ at the time of regeneration, for whom He now makes intercession in heaven and for whom he will come again*” (1992: 435). Make no mistake. “Belonging” was just as important to moderns yesterday as it is to postmoderns today. But as an examination of the foregoing article and similar confessional statements of both premodern and modern times will show, the kind of belonging that was emphasized was first of all spiritual and only secondarily psychological and social. Whatever the failure of its members to live up to their high calling, the true church was made up of a “*called out*” family of God that was designed to be different from the world and destined to be disciplined when it was not.

Towards an Analysis

McLaren's proposals with regard to belongingness seem too good to be wrong! But wrong they are. They subvert the true nature of the church and turn biblical ecclesiology on its head. Biblical ecclesiology makes a clear distinction between the church and the world. Three times in one brief passage, the apostle Paul speaks of outsiders (unbelievers, "ungifted") coming into worship services and, *being convicted by what believers were saying and doing*, falling down in repentance and declaring that God is really at work among *his* people (1 Cor. 14:13-25). The idea that this profound distinction between believers and unbelievers is to be smoothed over, and companion ideas that outsiders are free to contribute to worship and partake of the Lord's Table, never occurred to the apostle Paul! It's a pity that it occurred to Brian McLaren!

"New Ways of Becoming"

McLaren's take on how people around the world become Christian impacts negatively on his understanding of evangelization in general and his teachings having to do with sin, depravity, repentance, faith, conversion, reconciliation and regeneration in particular.

McLaren on Becoming a Christian

As we have said, McLaren prefers to think and speak in terms of *conversations* rather than *conversions*. He accuses us traditional evangelicals of being naïve and worse, not only in the ways we define and describe the gospel, but also in the ways we invite people to become Christians. The common approach that presents the gospel in a few simple statements that people of other religions or no religion must understand and agree to, and then informing them that they must "accept Christ" and be "born again," elicits his harshest criticism. It amounts to going around the world and telling people of other faiths that we are right and they are wrong. In McLaren's view and as far as these other religions are concerned, Jesus Christ came to fulfill those religions just as he came to fulfill the Old Testament law. As for the New Testament gospel, it does not have so much to do with being *right* as it has to do with being *good*. And becoming *good* is more a *process* than a *point*; more a matter of *following* than a matter of *believing*; more a *gradual transformation* than a *radical turning* (2001: chaps. 8-9; 2004: chap. 19; p. 254).

IFMA SOF Article #3 on Becoming a Christian

How unequivocal the statement of the IFMA: "*We believe that Adam, created in the image of God, was tempted by Satan, the god of this world, and fell. Because of Adam's sin, all men have guilt imputed, are totally depraved, and need to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit*" (1992:435). It is the sinfulness and depravity of the whole of mankind that makes such words and phrases as "have guilt imputed," "are totally depraved," and "need to be regenerated" as well as "the remission of sins," "received by faith," and "be

born again” essential. It is because we are sinners by nature, choice and decree of God that “becoming” a true believer logically (as well as theologically and existentially) comes *before* “belonging” to the church of Christ.

Towards an Analysis

Once again, McLaren’s views turn out to be radical. But they are not really new. They have been dealt with before. His theology of sin is not far from that of Pelagius who, about A.D. 400, denied both original sin and hereditary guilt. Not only were Pelagius’s teachings shown to be “wrong” by Augustine and other Church Fathers, they were also condemned at the Third General Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 which got it “right.”

As for “becoming a Christian,” McLaren’s approach does not seem to be far from that of the 19th century Yale theologian Horace Bushnell. Bushnell also criticized evangelical individualism, revivalism and conversionism. He emphasized “true Christian education” and the “law of Christian growth” according to which children could grow up never knowing themselves to be anything other than Christian.

As for fulfillment theory, it is reminiscent of the “re-thinking” of William E. Hocking and leaders associated with the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry in the 1930s. Only a few years had passed until the brilliant missiologist Hendrik Kraemer artfully demonstrated, not only that the Christian gospel is absolutely unique, but also that the communication of that gospel requires fidelity to that uniqueness!

Conclusion

Sketchy as the foregoing admittedly is, I have tried to be faithful to both Brian McLaren and his proposals. Where I might have misread or misinterpreted him, I humbly apologize both to him and to my readers. McLaren’s noble aspirations and his concern for emergents are certainly praiseworthy. Some of his criticisms of evangelical mission practice merit respectful consideration. But more simply must be said.

This particular analysis of McLaren’s contextualization of the gospel was originally suggested, not by a missiologist but by a theologian friend. As it turns out, my theologian friend could have done just as well as I have done in evaluating McLaren’s contextualization, and likely much better. After all, contra McLaren, authentic and relevant contextualization must begin with sound theology. It’s very first requirement is not attention to the mindset of respondents whether premodern, modern or postmodern, but attention to the authority and teachings of Holy Scripture. When respondent values and mindsets trump biblical teaching in the determination of Christian mission, message or method, *over*-contextualization will be the inevitable result. Brian McLaren and his new kind of Christians need to understand that, when compared to *under*-contextualization, *over*-contextualization represents no advantage whatsoever. Indeed, it may be even more dangerous.