

New kind of Christian: An Emergent voice

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

Brian McLaren's two most important books—*A New Kind of Christian* and the recent *A Generous Orthodoxy*—both open by raising the specter of an evangelical pastor leaving the ministry or the church altogether. The fictional lead character in *New Kind* is poised to abandon his ministry until a wise new friend initiates him into the ways of postmodern Christianity, rehabilitating his ministry and life. *Orthodoxy* reaches out to the disaffected in first-person plural: "So many of us have come close to withdrawing from the Christian community. It's not because of Jesus and his good news, but because of frustrations with religious politics, dubious theological propositions, difficulties in interpreting passages of the Bible that seem barbaric, or embarrassments from church history." Something has to change, or those on the ledge may go ahead and jump.

McLaren wants to make space for someone to be "postconservative." According to the subtitle of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he himself is 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."

To understand McLaren, one must understand the sort of church from which he comes. It is nondenominational yet conservative Reformed in doctrine, holding to God's eternal election of some to blessedness and some to perdition. It is proud of its opposition to modern liberalism and its defense of the five "fundamentals"—the virgin birth, biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, and the bodily resurrection and imminent return of Jesus. It is often (but not always) mobilized politically in support of the Religious Right and culturally in opposition to such movements as feminism, environmentalism and the liberalization of sexual mores.

Emerging from such a background, McLaren is urging his readers to embrace a more “generous orthodoxy.” What exactly does he mean by “generous”? He seeks to draw on resources from across the spectrum of Christian history and experience. An early chapter speaks of the “seven Jesuses” McLaren has known, beginning with the two most familiar to him: the conservative Protestant Jesus and the Pentecostal Jesus. He has also learned from the Eastern Orthodox Jesus (culled from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky), the Roman Catholic Jesus (from Flannery O’Connor and Thomas Merton), the Anabaptist Jesus (with his way of nonviolence), the Jesus of the Oppressed (from liberation theologians) and, most strikingly, the liberal Protestant Jesus.

Many conservative evangelicals would have a hard time calling any of these five Jesuses anything other than heretical, especially the last. But McLaren has great sympathy for liberal Protestants. He jokes that “if you scratch a liberal, you’ll find an alienated fundamentalist underneath.”

He knows something about being an alienated fundamentalist. As he writes, “I am far harder on conservative Protestant Christians who share this heritage than I am on anyone else.” He hopes followers of each of these Jesuses will find themselves able to work with the Emergent network, though he seems to have the most hope for the ones who don’t follow the “conservative evangelical” Jesus.

We can see McLaren’s generosity also in his refusal to make a judgment about non-Christians’ eternal destiny. He thinks the incarnation suggests an affirmation by God of human culture generally—including other religions, to a degree. Jesus’ own approach to those who were different from him was to “threaten them with inclusion,” to urge them to accept their acceptance (Tillich couldn’t have said it any better). A religion might best be judged by the “benefits it brings to its nonadherents.”

In fact, all religions face a common threat in the “McDonaldization and Wal-Martization of the world” and the weapons of mass destruction not in Arab countries but “down the road from my home in Washington, D.C.”

McLaren’s politics are another dramatic departure from conservatism-as-usual: “‘The Lord is my shepherd’ becomes ‘the Lord is my president,’ ready to sacrifice 10,000 lives of noncitizens elsewhere for the safety of U.S. citizens here . . . it sickens me,” he says.

McLaren skewers the Sunday school version of faith from which he comes as only one who grew up in the fold can: “Christians are nice people who know the truth and do good. Non-Christians are bad people who don’t. Therefore we need to avoid non-Christians or convert them as fast as possible or try to pass laws to keep them under control and protect ourselves from them—until we can escape them forever in heaven.”

McLaren is also challenging a conservative staple in his philosophical commitment to nonfoundationalism. The Enlightenment confidence in our ability to appeal to universal “reason” as an arbiter in debate has crumbled. Postmoderns have realized that there is no one thing called “reason,” that rationality is always embedded in specific stories and practices. Therefore the conservative defense of “absolute truth” in the culture wars is built on a cracked foundation. There are no “absolute” truths that float above the cultural fray, discernible apart from engagement in specific practices.

This stance is what finally allows McLaren to be so generous toward fellow Christians, non-Christians and liberals generally. Where they are right, they are fellow pilgrim seekers after truth. Where wrong, we can be sympathetic, since their efforts to discern truth are limited by their own time, place and background—as, inevitably, ours are too.

So far McLaren sounds as “generous” as any good liberal. So what makes him “orthodox”? Primarily it is his passion for Jesus. He celebrates the seven different approaches to Jesus not simply because they display a “diversity” of views about which he seeks to be “open-minded,” but rather because they each show facets of Jesus viewed from different angles. McLaren is not trying to convince anyone to do anything other than follow Jesus.

On doctrinal matters McLaren professes allegiance to the historic faith presented in the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds. His church, unlike the vast majority of nondenominational and evangelical parishes, celebrates the Eucharist weekly. He displays an ongoing love of the scriptures, explored not as an infallible fact book but as a richly multilayered narrative of God’s ongoing work on Israel and the church, with Jesus at its center. His most-often quoted authority on the historic faith is G. K. Chesterton; on scripture it is such postliberal interpreters as Walter Brueggemann and N. T. Wright. Theologians such as Nancy Murphy and Stanley Hauerwas have been invited to speak at Emergent conventions. Postliberals and postconservatives

may have broken off from different branches of the tree of Christendom, but they now seem to be grafting into the same trunk theologically.

McLaren is most clearly “orthodox” in his embrace of evangelicalism’s traditional love of missions. He cites missiologists Lesslie Newbigin and Vincent Donovan in claiming that missiology is misunderstood as a subfield in Christian theology. On the contrary, theology is a subfield in the greater discipline and practice of Christian missions. Such a missional focus consists not only in preaching to non-Christians with hope of conversion; it also includes work for justice in cooperation with all-comers.

Perhaps most tellingly, mission involves “passion.” McLaren elaborates: “When evangelicals sing, they *sing*. When evangelicals pray, they *pray*. When evangelicals preach, they *preach*. When evangelicals decide something is worth doing, they *do* it. They don’t tend to establish committees to study the feasibility of doing it. They don’t ask permission from the bureaucracy to do it. They don’t get a degree that qualifies them to do it. They *just do it*—and with passion.” Elsewhere he writes that as enthusiastic as he is about orthodox understandings of the Trinity, these understandings are useless without trinitarianly shaped love of neighbor. Orthodoxy without orthopraxy is St. Paul’s “noisy gong or clanging cymbal.”

McLaren’s work succeeds finally because of its tone. He offers not another treatise about why everyone else is wrong but his group is right; he insists regularly that he must be as blind to his own vices and oversight as those he criticizes. He offers a vision of Christianity in which no one has to lose. And that has deep appeal across the theological spectrum.

Yet it also has its possible problems, one of which is a weakness for kitsch. His book’s subtitle shows this, as does an initial chapter titled “for mature audiences only,” which asks the reader, Web site-like, to check a box if she or he agrees to the terms laid out. At one point McLaren compares the variety of faithful Christian traditions to the variety of ethnic foods one might eat—shouldn’t we enjoy all of them? One worries that the embrace of ancient Christian thought and practice could turn out to be no more deeply rooted than a consumerist choice between options at the food court.

McLaren’s work and Emergent’s conferences display an unflinching embrace of technology and cultural relevancy, like so many nerds who have only recently

discovered they can be cool. Yet even here McLaren disarms with winsome honesty. He reveals that he has never attended seminary (though he now regularly is an adjunct professor at several), but in the common evangelical practice was chosen by a house church as its preacher. “I am a confessed amateur,” he says. He concedes that he could at least have “footnoted reputable scholars who make the same generalizations I do,” but, perhaps mercifully, he has spared us. This academically amateur status has driven McLaren and Emergent to look for intellectual resources where they can find them.

In the best evangelical tradition, I can offer personal testimony as a witness to the significance of McLaren’s project. When I was in high school I encountered a youth pastor at a nondenominational church who was intellectually curious and intellectually rigorous, politically engaged, doctrinally orthodox, yet not rigidly so. That experience allowed me, later on, to learn from an even wider range of Christian thinkers, past and present. McLaren’s vision is that each of us—and not only those of us with “post” attached to our name—will learn something of Jesus from one another that we would otherwise have missed.