

**"Undefining" God's Mission -  
The Emerging Church "On a Mission from God"**

**by Bob DeWaay**

The following essay is chapter two from Bob DeWaay's book *The Emergent Church – Undefining Christianity*. We publish it here because the terminology and concept of missional has spread throughout evangelicalism. Christians need to be warned that being "missional" has nothing to do with the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Almost universally, people involved with the Emergent "conversation" espouse one theme: they consider themselves to be missional. Being "missional" is not what traditional Christians have known as "missions." We have believed that the Christian mission was to send people with the message of the gospel to places where the gospel had not been heard—to preach it and establish churches. As Christianity became established in various cultures, other Christian workers usually came to establish schools, hospitals, and perform other practical expressions of Christian love and mercy. This is not what Emergent thinkers have in mind when they describe themselves as "missional."

For one thing, the description above started with the idea of the gospel as defined in the Bible. The Emergent mission does not begin with any theological idea. It is not gleaned from Biblical texts such as this one: "*and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*" (**Luke 24:47**). In fact the Emergent mission does not even start from a set of theological beliefs. I say this because their use of "missional" describes the idea that any works that make the world a better place bring us toward the ideal future.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Hegelian synthesis is ever lurking in the background of Emergent thinking; and this is the case with the idea of "missional." For example, Brian McLaren writes concerning his idea of "missional:" "The term, as I understand it, attempts to find a generous third way beyond the conservative and liberal versions of Christianity so dominant in the Western world."<sup>1</sup> McLaren's idea is that one does not begin with a set of theological beliefs that determine one's mission, but rather begins with a mission and some sort of theology emerges in the process: "Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, its meaning."<sup>2</sup> So in his thinking we can know our mission before we know theological truth.

When I first read that I thought it irrational on the grounds that one would need some theological belief in order to justify going on any mission in God's name. Our *a priori* beliefs tell us what an appropriate mission would be. That was before I discovered their eschatological beliefs. Now I know why they are missional. They believe God to be

bringing everything along toward an ideal future without judgment. Therefore any practice deemed to make the world better is a suitable mission. In their view the only thing that *doesn't* make sense is preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins so people can avoid a literal, future judgment (because they do not believe in future judgment). Ironically, the one approach to missions that Emergent leaders reject routinely is the one based on Jesus' own words to His church.

Not surprisingly, Jürgen Moltmann, 40 years ago, proposed that in light of his eschatology, what we have now is a mission—the knowledge of truth is something that lies in the future.<sup>3</sup> For example, Moltmann writes, "The horizon within which the resurrection of Christ becomes knowable as 'resurrection', is the horizon of promise and mission, beckoning us on to his future and the future of his lordship."<sup>4</sup> Moltmann claims that we cannot even know what "resurrection" means or even what the resurrection of Christ means until the future:

'Raising of the dead' is an expression which looks expectantly towards the future proof of God's creative power over the non-existent. What 'resurrection of the dead' really is, and what 'actually happened' in the raising of Jesus, is thus a thing which not even the New Testament Easter narratives profess to know. From the two mutually radically contradictory experiences of the cross and the appearances of Jesus, they argue to the event in between as an eschatological event for which the verifying analogy is as yet only in prospect and is still to come.<sup>5</sup>

So in this thinking we really do not know what the cross or the resurrection of Christ mean since they are deemed "contradictory," but we will find out in the future. Yet we continue to have a mission. The only reason by which a Christian mission is deemed valid is a dialectic process that leads somewhere universally good. Moltmann states, "Cross and resurrection are then not merely *modi* in the person of Christ. Rather, their dialectic is an open dialectic, which will find its resolving synthesis only in the *eschaton* of all things."<sup>6</sup>

Knowing that Moltmann's theology (and that of others similar to his) lies at the heart of the many Emergent leaders' thinking, let us think again about McLaren's previously cited statement: "Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, its meaning." The reason he thinks we do not know these things now, is that according to the Emergent eschatology they are by nature unknowable (now, that is). So the only recourse is to discover one's mission in the world through observation, with the belief that the many contradictions that one encounters are being synthesized into a new, better reality that lies in the future. This is very much what Moltmann himself stated: "The Christian consciousness of history is not a consciousness in the knowledge of a divine commission, and is therefore a consciousness of the contradiction inherent in this unredeemed world, and the sign of the cross under which the Christian mission and the Christian hope stand."<sup>7</sup> In other words we have no knowledge of a divine commission, and, as I cited

him earlier, we have no knowledge of what the cross and resurrection mean, either (at least not now). So we have an undefined mission that must be discovered.

McLaren and others are quite sure of the one thing the mission is *not*: the salvation of souls so that people go to heaven when they die. He and other Emergent writers regularly mock that idea as a consumer good being sold to the unsuspecting for the benefit of badly motivated religious leaders. For example, McLaren writes, "Is it any surprise that it's stinking hard to convince churches that they have a mission to the world when most Christians equate 'personal salvation' of individual 'souls' with the ultimate aim of Jesus? Is it any wonder that people feel like victims of a bait and switch when they're lured with personal salvation and then hooked with church commitment and world mission?"<sup>8</sup> The only reason McLaren thinks ideas such as salvation from God's future judgment are unworthy of defining the church's mission is because he does not believe in a literal future judgment. And as we saw in the previous chapter he and his co-authors of another book think we are headed toward a universal paradise. Rescuing perishing souls when no one's soul is actually going to perish is certainly a fool's mission—unless, of course, the Bible is true, and there *is* a literal hell and many people will end up there!

### **Gaining Theology by Observing Pagans**

Brian McLaren credits Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic missionary, as a key figure who inspired him to change his ideas about the meaning of salvation and the Christian mission.<sup>9</sup> He cites Donovan to support his claim that one's mission is not to be found in a prior theological understanding:

I was to learn that any theology or theory that makes no reference to previous missionary experience, which does not take that experience into account, is a dead and useless thing . . . praxis must be prior to theology . . . In my work [theology would have to proceed] from practice to theory. If a theology did emerge from my work, it would have to be a theology growing out of the life and experience of the pagan peoples of the savannahs of East Africa.<sup>10</sup>

This means that apparently having been given no clear instructions from Jesus Christ, the true Head of the Church, about what He wants us to do and teach, we gain a theology by observing the pagans. Furthermore, we have to allow practice to hold priority over belief.

Let us consider several ramifications of this "missional" thinking of the Emergent Church. First, rather than learning about God and His will from special revelation (the Bible) we must learn about Him from general revelation (observation of creation). The term "theology" means the study of God. General revelation shows us that there is a

Creator (see Romans 1 and Psalm 19), but the knowledge gained through general revelation is not a saving knowledge—it is a condemning knowledge, according to Paul's teaching in Romans 1. Saving knowledge comes through special revelation:

*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. . . . How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, (**Hebrews 1:1, 2 and 2:3**)*

The only knowledge of God the pagans have is through general revelation. This leads to all manner of pagan religions and wicked practices. Pagan religious practices are notoriously abusive. That being the case, how does one construct a theology from observation of pagans in the mission field? Had God not chosen to reveal Himself through His spoken words and the person and work of Christ, the whole world would be pagan and devoted to various versions of nature worship or creature worship. Observing creation or human cultures devoid of the gospel cannot produce a valid theology.

Second, the notion that one's practice must hold priority over theology (a claim constantly repeated by Emergent authors) is equally invalid. What people believe will determine what practices they value. Any study of world religions makes that clear. The caste system in India, pagan child sacrifice, the traditional Islamic treatment of women, and other practices are driven by theological ideas. If Emergent followers claim they are going to do good to all people and make the world a better place, they must have some source for their definition of what is a "good" practice as opposed to what is a bad one. If the source is the "red letters" of the Bible, as some claim, then they do have a theology that is prior to their praxis. They, for some reason, have determined that some of Jesus' teachings are ethically good and worthy to guide their practice. But the "red letters" were not found on the pagan mission field; they were found in the Holy Spirit-inspired Bible. They must have some *a priori* theology about Jesus that would cause them to think His ethical teachings are superior to the teachings of Hinduism that resulted in the idea of karma and the caste system.

Third, if indeed the missional approach that knows very little about theology, while being quite certain that one's mission is valid, it is incumbent upon those so certain about their mission to validate it in some manner that is not self-referential. For example, claiming to be on a mission from God without any possible way of knowing what God has said is a self-validating claim. How do they know any mission is a God-selected mission for them? "Because God is good and of course God wants us to do good rather than evil." How then do they know their definition of "good" is the same as God's? If they keep pressing the question they are forced to accept some sort of communication from God. If such communication exists and is valid, then God has spoken. If God has spoken, then we can know the truth about Him and His will. If we know the truth about Him and His will from valid, verbal communication, then we can know what mission He wants us on. If we

know that, the "missional" claims of the Emergent Church are false. If we cannot know that, then why go to a pagan people and try to persuade them to stop putting their young girls in temples to be abused by priests? Maybe their gods really told them to do that and are pleased with the practice.

This underscores a huge flaw in the teachings of the Emergent Church. If we cannot know the truth about anything with certainty until the future, then we really cannot know what our mission is either. The only way we can know what the future holds is if God has revealed it through infallible prophets. But what He has revealed through infallible prophets is rejected by Emergent writers because they cannot tolerate a scenario in which the cosmos comes to a violent end, as described in Scripture:

*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! (2Peter 3:10 – 12)*

If they feel free to reject the teachings of the Bible on the grounds that no one is sure what the Bible means (a claim we shall address in a later chapter), they have therefore cut themselves off from any means of knowing the future with certainty.

So for them, like Moltmann, the truth will only be known with certainty in the future. Once again, if the *truth* cannot be known about the future until the future, then a valid mission cannot be known either. Mission, by its very nature, is an attempt to serve God by doing His will in order to further His purposes for the church in the world. But if they have no idea that their understanding of God's ultimate will for all is any better than the ideas held by those of different religions, they cannot know that their missional calling as they understand it is not *fighting against* what God wills to happen. They have gone willingly into a hopeless quagmire of unknowing.

But theirs is a theology of "hope." They evidently believe that Peter was dead wrong when he predicted the demise of the earth in a future conflagration of God's judgment. They rather believe that God is re-creating the world now with our help. So the mission has to be defined in terms of making the world a better place for all. Brian McLaren is a Christian, he says, because he believes God is saving the world, and that means "planet Earth and all life on it."<sup>11</sup> In a backward chain of reasoning, the pagan world determines their practice; their practice determines their theology; and their theology is one of hope because they decided it is the one they like best because it states that the world has a universally bright future with no pending, cataclysmic judgment.

## The "Secret" Message as Known by Brian McLaren

In a monograph by that title, McLaren claims to have discovered "The Secret Message of Jesus."<sup>12</sup> In an endnote to chapter one McLaren reveals the subtitle he wished to have used, but did not in order to avoid being "ungainly." The subtitle could have been, *"The Secret Message of Jesus: His surprising and Largely Untried Plan for a Political, Social, Religious, Artistic, Economic, Intellectual, and Spiritual Revolution."*<sup>13</sup> The plan McLaren discovered through a supposedly astute reading of the gospels is a plan to establish the Kingdom of God now through the social gospel. McLaren asks:

What if Jesus' secret message reveals a secret plan? What if he didn't come to start a new religion—but rather came to start a political, social, religious, artistic, economic, intellectual, and spiritual revolution that would give birth to a new world?<sup>14</sup>

In his subtle fashion he suggests the new world order that Jesus supposedly envisioned that was supposed to happen through processes within history.

According to McLaren's reading of the gospels, the church got it wrong. It historically understood that it was supposed to preach the gospel, which would rescue people from God's wrath against their sin through application of the blood atonement. But finally—after all these years—finally Jesus' message is understood by a select few who are better readers than those who have gone before.<sup>15</sup> They have discovered that Jesus never intended that we warn people about how to escape future judgment and how to receive the gift of eternal life so they will join Him when they die. He never intended for us to think we needed Him to do something for us in order to avoid going to hell. He actually was hoping we would go to work to help God fulfill His dreams of a better world. McLaren explains:

And more still . . . these words [McLaren's rejection of God's future judgment of the world through cataclysmic destruction] make me happy for God. Like a mother dreaming of a good future for the baby at her breast, like a father standing at the crib watching his newborn sleep peacefully, God will see God's own primal dream for creation finally coming true—and that dream won't be imposed by God from outside by domination against creation's will, but it will emerge from within creation itself, so that God's dream and creation's groaning for fulfillment are one.<sup>16</sup>

That statement gives us a good idea what "emerging" is all about for the Emergent Church. God is doing something in creation that will cause paradise to emerge within time without the type of judgment stated in Scripture and understood by most Christians

throughout the Church age. It is not hard to see the theology of Moltmann here, and as we will see later, the philosophy of Ken Wilber.

McLaren's hopeful eschatology is the only thing, in my opinion, that separates the rest of *The Secret Message of Jesus* from the old-fashioned social gospel of theological liberalism. As I read his book I found the social gospel on nearly every page. When people practice the social gospel (working to make the world a better place by promoting and practicing ideas common to both theological and political liberalism) they supposedly help God's "dreams" come true. This idea of helping God solve the world's problems has been promoted by various streams of liberalism for more than a century. The difference for Moltmann and McLaren is that they claim to know that we will succeed in making it happen.

McLaren's terminology (which strikes me as a textbook example of misused anthropomorphism) reveals a very shoddy understanding of God's sovereign power over His own universe: "Perhaps all along, my deepest joy has never been to have all my dreams come true, but rather to have God's one dream come true: *that this world will become a place God is at home in, a place God takes pride and pleasure in, a place where God's dreams come true.*"<sup>17</sup> So the missional, Emergent "follower of Jesus" is on a mission to help God have his dreams come true. The term "dreams" as McLaren uses it for himself and God means "one's hope for an ideal future."<sup>18</sup> This is a stark departure from a theology of God grounded in the teachings of Scripture.

Let us consider some Biblical passages at this point and then contemplate the claim that God has dreams for the future in much the same way we do. For example, "*Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'*" (**Isaiah 46:9, 10**). This hardly gives us the impression that God needs our help or has dreams somehow contingent upon things outside of Himself or beyond His control. Paul taught: "*also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*" (**Ephesians 1:11**). The following passage from Psalms reveals truth about God and His relationship to His own creation that is far different from McLaren's:

*Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations; You established the earth, and it stands. They stand this day according to Your ordinances, For **all things are Your servants.** (**Psalm 119:89 – 91**)*

Consider this passage: "*But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases*" (**Psalm 115:3**). God neither dreams in the manner that humans do nor does He have to wait 2000 years hoping that His own church will finally, for the first time, find out that Jesus really meant to teach us the social gospel so we could turn this world into the

kingdom of God through good works. According to the Bible, God speaks, God decrees, and God brings to pass. *He does not dream about a possible, contingent future!*

As I continue to read the literature being published by the leaders of the Emergent Church it becomes clear to me why they have so much disdain for systematic theology. What we just saw in comparing McLaren's teaching on God's "dreams" and Biblical material about God's sovereign decrees is a good case in point. If McLaren were forced to be "systematic" in his use of Scripture he would be required to deal with passages like those I cited. But he does not. He tells us how he reads the gospels and what he has gleaned, but he sees no need to give account for any other material in the Bible even though other passages contradict his own teachings. That is how he is able to sustain his social gospel—by neglect of the whole counsel of God.

This same dynamic applies to McLaren's definition of the kingdom of God. He says, "Interestingly, John almost never uses the term 'kingdom of God' (which is at the heart of Jesus' message for Matthew, Mark and Luke)."<sup>19</sup> But when John does use the term he teaches things that do not fit McLaren's theological grid. John's Gospel cites Jesus teaching that one must be "born again" to see the Kingdom and enter it (John 3:3-5). John's gospel also features this statement by Jesus: "*Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.'*" (**John 18:36**). What John does write about the kingdom of God disproves McLaren's teachings about it. The kingdom is not of this world, and only those supernaturally born again may enter it.

But McLaren diverts his readers from what John actually wrote, and instead does some creative reinterpretation of the idea of "eternal life" in John's gospel. McLaren states, "Unfortunately the phrase *eternal life* is often misinterpreted to mean 'life in heaven after you die'—as are *kingdom of God* and its synonym, *kingdom of heaven*—so I think we need to find a better rendering."<sup>20</sup> Here is his better rendering:

Near the end of John's account, Jesus makes a particularly fascinating statement in a prayer, and it is as close as we get to a definition: "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [God has] sent." (John 17:3). So here, "eternal life" means knowing, and knowing means an interactive relationship. In other words, "This is eternal life, to have an interactive relationship with the only true God and with Jesus Christ, his messenger." Interestingly, that's what a kingdom is too: an interactive relationship one has with a king, the king's other subjects, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

In a footnote, McLaren credits the Christian mystic Dallas Willard for the terminology "interactive relationship."<sup>22</sup> McLaren's interpretation of John 17:3 is suspect.

The real point is that those who know God through Christ are the ones who have received the gift of eternal life. John does not define "know God" as "interactive relationship." The topic of eternal life was taken up extensively in John 3, where the Kingdom of God is



mentioned. The issues revealed in John 3 have to do with being born again and believing so as not to perish. (To perish meant to abide under God's judgment. See John 3:1-15.) McLaren obscures John's gospel in order to import his own definition of the kingdom (which, according to McLaren, is very much of this world or realm).

Furthermore the idea of going to heaven is indeed found in John. In John 3:13-15 Jesus is the one who ascends into heaven and is the one who gives eternal life. Here is what Jesus said to his disciples who believed Him:

*Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1-3)*

Where exactly is this "Father's house" to which Jesus will bring believers? Jesus said in verse 12, "I go to the Father." McLaren ignores John's most pertinent passages on the matter of the kingdom of God, and his meaning of having eternal life. McLaren cites a passage not pertinent to the concept of the kingdom of God and misuses it to redefine what Jesus means by "knowing God." He misinterprets John to be teaching McLaren's own version of the social gospel as "the kingdom of God." This is a flawed approach to reading any literature, much less God's inspired Scriptures.

Here is the result of McLaren's rendition of John's gospel:

So John's related phrases—*eternal life*, *life to the full*, and simply *life*—give us a unique angle on what Jesus meant by "kingdom of God": a life that is radically different from the way people are living these days, a life that is full and over-flowing, a higher life that is centered in an interactive relationship with God and Jesus. Let's render it simply 'an extraordinary life to the full centered in a relationship with God.'<sup>23</sup>

This sophistry can only survive if one purposely ignores some very clear teaching in John that disproves McLaren's ideas. For example consider this section:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment. (John 5:24 – 29)*

Jesus is speaking of a future resurrection unto life or judgment, and not merely better living now with religion.

McLaren also redefines being born again according to John 3. After rejecting the idea that being born again is something that happens through some belief or experience he says this:

No, Jesus is saying "Nicodemus, you're a Pharisee. You're a respected teacher yourself. But if you are coming to me hoping to experience the extraordinary life to the full I've been teaching about, you are going to have to go back to the very beginning. You're going to have to become like a baby all over again, to unlearn everything you are already so sure of, so you can be retaught."<sup>24</sup>

This is *not* what the passage says. It actually claims that rebirth or regeneration is a supernatural work of the Spirit of God, not a process of re-educating the sinner. Being born again is a work of God that cannot be explained by a natural process. If God did not do this work, it could not happen. McLaren explains it to be the opposite of what the passage teaches (i.e., a natural process of being retaught rather than a supernatural process of being regenerated).

Furthermore, McLaren's interpretation of John 3 ignores other Biblical passages about the new birth such as 1Peter 1:3 and 1Peter 1:23 as well as Titus 3:5-7, which teaches regeneration. None of these passages suggest a naturalistic idea of better living now through re-education or an interactive relationship with God.

The mission as understood by McLaren and other Emergent leaders also is described in terms similar to Liberation theology. Linking his idea of the kingdom to "the revolution of God," he sees the Emergent mission to be analogous to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s fight against injustice and other social evils.<sup>25</sup> He sees the world as it is in terms of a "regime" in which some people oppress others by various means. He says, "This regime is unacceptable (an understatement I hope you recognize), and God is recruiting people to join a revolutionary movement of change."<sup>26</sup> McLaren also uses other metaphors such as a party, a network, and a dance to illustrate what he thinks one is joining when helping God fulfill His dream of making the world into the kingdom without cataclysmic judgment.<sup>27</sup>

What is apparent in the Emergent, missional approach is that the words God inspired the Biblical authors to write, which authoritatively define the church's mission, are seen to be of little value. The mission is not derived from biblical exegesis, but from the thoughts and desires of the person who embarks on the mission. In short, the way Emergents read the church's mission means that the *reader* determines the meaning; the biblical authors do not. What they have determined is that one need not be a Christian to participate; salvation has nothing to do with avoiding future judgment or going to heaven; holistically saving planet earth is essential; changing society as a whole is essential; the church has

not gotten the mission right in 2,000 years or even understood what it was; and that the Emerging Church is the best hope that, finally, God will be able to have His dreams fulfilled.

### **The Church's Mission as Defined in the Bible**

My research into the teachings and practices of the Emergent Church has uncovered an amazing irony. They routinely cast doubts on the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. (I will discuss it in a later chapter.) Supposedly the meaning of Scripture is cryptic—nearly impossible to understand—because of linguistic and cultural considerations and largely hidden. But reading the literature of Moltmann, Shults, McLaren, and others with similar theology is a most tedious and frustrating experience because they write in a cryptic, difficult manner, taking pains to be ambiguous, paradoxical, and vague. Compared with the pain of trying to understand them so I do not misrepresent what they believe, understanding the Bible is quite simple and straightforward.

To illustrate the point I will explain the Church's mission according to the terms found in Luke/Acts. We will see that it is rather clear. In Luke/Acts, Jesus gives His disciples their commission and explains how it will be accomplished. Acts then shows that it is actually accomplished in the very manner in which Jesus said it would be.

Here is Luke's description of the Church's mission: "*and He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem'*" (**Luke 24:46, 47**). Luke/Acts is a two-volume work written by one author (Luke) and shows itself to be a single work in two parts by internal consistencies and the introduction of themes in Luke that are not fully developed until Acts.<sup>28</sup> For example, at the end of Luke Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem to be clothed with power from on high and in Acts 2 that very thing happens. This narrative unity can be seen in the commission to preach "repentance for forgiveness of sins." The theme of repentance for forgiveness of sins began much earlier in Luke. John the Baptist preached "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Jesus described His own mission as having come to "call sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The angels in heaven are said to rejoice over "one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:7). Notoriously wicked cities would have repented had they seen the miracles Jesus performed (Luke 10:13). People who had perished at the hands of a tyrant and through a natural disaster serve as a warning about the fate of all who do not repent (Luke 13:1-5). It is impossible to miss the importance of preaching repentance. The two most important people in Luke (Jesus and John the Baptist, whose birth narratives are intertwined and spoken of in terms of divine visitation) preached repentance, and the disciples were commissioned to do the same.

Furthermore, Luke's two-volume narrative shows that the disciples faithfully carried out this commission. In doing so, Luke/Acts makes clear what is meant by repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Only the most contrived and confused reading of Luke/Acts could miss this emphasis. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told them how they would be used by the Holy Spirit: *"but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."* This is exactly what happened. In carrying out Jesus' commission, did they proceed along the lines Brian McLaren describes? That is, did they go out to make the world a better place, to tell industrialists to stop polluting, to cooperate with other religions in order to make the kingdom of God develop now through social action, and teach other practices promoted by the Emerging Church? No! They obeyed Jesus and preached repentance.

The first example is prototypical as Peter (newly filled with the Spirit) preached to the crowd gathered for Pentecost. He indicted them for their sins (Acts 2:23, 36), and proclaimed Christ to have been crucified and raised on the third day, proving Himself to be the one to whom David pointed when he wrote that God's Holy One would not suffer decay (Acts 2:22-26). As Peter preached Christ and the resurrection some of his hearers were "pierced to the heart" (convicted by the Holy Spirit). They were now willing to respond in obedience as they asked "what shall we do?" If McLaren's social gospel were the true mission of the church that would have been the time for Peter to tell it to those who were to become the first church, gathered together by the Holy Spirit. Had he done so, presumably Jesus' "secret message" would not have been lost for 2,000 years. But instead Peter said this, *"And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38).*

Reading Luke/Acts as the two-volume work it is shows that Luke believed that Peter faithfully carried out Jesus' commission as cited in Luke 24:47. Here again is repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The early believers were baptized and they gathered around the apostle's teachings, breaking bread, and praying (Acts 2:41, 42). This is taught in Luke/Acts as a work of the Holy Spirit. This work of God did not unite world religions around good works to make life on planet earth a paradise now, but actually divided the church from early Judaism. This too was something Jesus predicted: *"Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division" (Luke 12:51).* Acts describes the division in stark terms as early Christians were persecuted by their former Jewish brethren.

To show that preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins at Pentecost was not an isolated instance. The theme continues as the message of the gospel spreads along the geographical and cultural lines predicted in Acts 1:8. Peter again told his Jewish brethren to repent in Acts 3:19. When the gospel spread to God-fearing Gentiles in Acts 10, and Peter explained to the other apostles that he had baptized Gentiles, they were finally convinced he was right to do so: *"And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance*

*that leads to life"* (**Acts 11:18**). Being converted through the gospel was described in terms of having been granted repentance.

After Paul's conversion he becomes key in Acts, much like Peter was in the early part of the book. Did Paul understand Jesus' commission to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins to apply only to the early disciples? No! Here is how Paul explained his own preaching in Ephesus: "*solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Acts 20:21**). Acts even ends with the same theme that began with John the Baptist's preaching in Luke 3: "*but [I Paul] kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance*" (**Acts 26:20**).

The church's mission is not cryptic in Luke/Acts, but is quite clear. How it was carried out by its early, Spirit-empowered leaders is normative. We are to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, including the proclamation of the person and work of Christ. People need to know that they are sinners facing judgment. They need to know who Christ is: His pre-existence, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His shed blood that averts God's wrath against our sins, His resurrection, and the threat that when He returns He will bring judgment, and the wicked will be removed from the righteous and cast into hell (see Matthew 13:47 – 50).

We have a choice: We can follow the mission that Jesus gave the church as understood by the Apostles who gave us the New Testament, or we can become "missional" and find a more appealing mission by consulting other religions and our own "missional" community's sensibilities. The one is very clear and has been normative for 2,000 years. The other is confused, fuzzy, and unclear and was recently discovered by some innovative men. If we choose the latter we also are choosing to believe that Jesus' warnings about hell are false. That is a most dangerous choice to make.

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## End Notes

1. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2004; published by Zondervan) 105.
2. Ibid.
3. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 194 – 197.

4. Ibid. 196.
5. Ibid. 197.
6. Ibid. 201. “eschaton” means the end or final destiny of things; emphasis in original.
7. Ibid. 195.
8. McLaren *Generous* 107.
9. Ibid. 91-93.
10. Vincent Donovan cited by McLaren, *Generous* 92.
11. McLaren, *Generous* 97.
12. Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus – Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006).
13. Ibid. 229 n. 1.
14. Ibid. 4.
15. McLaren cites his English majors in college and graduate school that gave him “sensitivities” to read the parables and thus find the secret message. Ibid. 43.
16. Ibid. 203.
17. Ibid. emphasis in original.
18. Ibid. 142. I say that because McLaren states that his “dream of God” idea is that “evoked by Dr. Martin Luther King.” When King said, “I have a dream” he was explaining his hope for an ideal future that would be brought to pass through processes within history.
19. Ibid. 36.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid. 37.
22. I deal with Willard’s theology in [CIC Issue 91](#) November/December 2005.
23. McLaren *Message* 37.
24. Ibid. 38.
25. Ibid. 142.
26. Ibid. 143.
27. Ibid. 146 – 148.
28. See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke—Acts – A Literary Interpretation vol. 1 & 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).