

The Word of God and the Emergent Church
A Lutheran Critique

Word of God
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I. Introduction

One of the significant theological developments of contemporary American Evangelicalism today is the emerging church movement and its subsection the Emergent church.¹ The emergent movement is inherently difficult to define due to its resistance to doctrinal formulations. Despite this, emerging and Emergent authors are mostly consistent on both their doctrine and their approach to practice². They rightly confess the relationship of *orthopraxis* to *orthodoxy* but begin with *orthopraxis*, allowing their practice to define their theology. The emerging approach to theology yields an inherently deficient view of Scripture.

Recent conferences and workshops held by official organizations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LC–MS) featured keynote speakers influenced by or from the emerging church.³ While the Lutheran church does not share the same theological or historical roots, its entities have taken cues from the emerging church movement.⁴ The adoption of the term “missional,” mercy causes, and the embrace of ancient liturgy and practice appeals to the youth and outreach entities within the LC–MS. A critical assessment considerate of the doctrine and practice of the emerging ideology is essential to determine its appropriateness for churches of the Lutheran confession, namely in its confession regarding the Holy Scriptures.

II. The Emerging Word

The emerging movement is inherently difficult to define. The resistance to unified doctrinal formulations (dogma) makes a critique problematic.⁵ The popular emergent church theologians come from various American Evangelical backgrounds. The uncoordinated impetus forming the movement is resistance to institutional churches and institutionalized church practices. Their approach to theology begins with a corrective to ecclesiology only later considering confession

of doctrine. Their ecclesial focuses include missions, evangelism, embrace of a postmodern worldview, narrative theology, conversation, communal living, morality, “green” theology, and social justice. Consistent to their theological backgrounds and ecclesiological ideals and despite their internal dissension within the community, emerging leaders confess a nearly unified doctrine of Scripture.

Brian D. McLaren, arguably the most popular proponent of emerging thought, confesses a doctrine of Scripture in the chapter “Why I Am Biblical” in his seminal work of 2006. He says “I believe it is a gift from God, inspired by God, to benefit us in the most important way possible: equipping us so that we can benefit others, so that we can play our part in the ongoing mission of God.”⁶ Not surprising from this confession with the absence of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, McLaren’s ecclesiology focuses on social justice and causes.⁷

In considering the nature of inspiration, McLaren rightly understands the *pneuma* of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, to refer to the breath of Genesis 1 creation. McLaren discusses the relation of God’s breath and the human impulses that produced the Scriptures. He rightly critiques those who deny the “organic participation” of the Scriptures (“no personality, no community, no culture, no historical context.”⁸) He also critiques those like R. Bultmann who do not see God-with-us in the composition of Scriptures but instead pursue the origin of the mythology.

McLaren understands 2 Timothy 3:16-17 as providing the clearest hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture. In summary McLaren says “The Bible is good for equipping people to do good works. It does so specifically through teaching (telling you what is true and right), rebuking (helping you see where you’ve gone wrong), correction (guiding you on how to get on the right track again), and training in justice (educating you in the skills of staying on the right path.)”⁹

This is Scripture's essential purpose for McLaren. He denies the traditional terms like authority, inerrancy, infallibility, revelation, objective, absolute, and literal as being of little value as many do not understand their importance is only within certain contexts. What contexts McLaren has in mind are not defined.

The profitable purpose of Scripture according to McLaren is to inspire the building of hospitals, giving to the needy, defending racial equality, creation of art, and approach their daily work with a special sense of purpose, love, and joy. How does McLaren then deal with Exodus and Joshua, where the "God of love and compassion...allegedly commands what today we would call brutality, chauvinism, ethnic cleansing, or holocaust?"¹⁰ He believes we need to reclaim the Bible as narrative with a specific context, not giving universal application but later supplanted by a better way. We should not be "preoccupied with some golden age in the ancient world" but instead learn "from the past to let God's story, God's will, and God's dream continue to come true in us and our children."¹¹

McLaren outlines his journey from traditional Christianity in an essay "The Method, the Message, and the Ongoing Story."¹² He is critical of methodologies (confessions), stating that they fix the interpretation of texts. Moving away from a fixed interpretation, he found that altering his "method of preaching, evangelizing, discipleship, leading worship" changed his "so-called unchanging message."¹³ *Orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* interacts. He states this change took him away from "the death of Jesus on the cross as the substitutionary atoning sacrifice for my sins"¹⁴ and toward his current confession of the gospel.

In this work McLaren nuances his understanding, giving a four-fold approach: "the Gospel as story; the Gospel as a many versioned, many faceted, many layered, and Christ centered; the

Gospel as cumulative; the Gospel as performative and catalytic.”¹⁵ The purpose of this method is to properly (in his model) alter the gospel message along with its methods. “The many-versioned, many-faceted, many-layered, but always Christ-centered gospel story must draw from its resources in new ways to address the new situation.”¹⁶ As stated above, McLaren believes the purpose of the Gospel is the living of good works for the neighbor.

Dan Kimball is another popular figure in the emerging church movement and a recent speaker to LC–MS youth leaders. Those who doubt the influence of Kimball, need look no further than his “The Emerging Church”¹⁷, featuring forwards by McLaren and Rick Warren. Like McLaren, Kimball states his intent to focus on mission methodology. His foundational issues are “there is no single model for the emerging church; the emerging church is more of a mindset than a model; the emerging church measures success missionally.”¹⁸ As with McLaren, Scripture is placed into subjection to these goals of success with priority given to method and practice.

Kimball confesses his understanding of Scripture in his chapter “Preaching without Words.” He believes the modern mindset of Scripture is that it is facts that influence belief which in turn influences behavior. The emerging culture he seeks uses experience to influence behavior and so influence belief.¹⁹ He claims this follows the pattern of Scripture where experience was followed with the proposition. Christian preaching needs to give people truthful experiences along with truthful preaching. Kimball states that the church needs to put everything into the primary goal of discipleship, manifested as a relationship with Jesus which is lived out in love and cannot help but be mission-minded.²⁰

A similar confession is given by Eddie Gibbs, popular in both the emerging and church growth movements, in his work “Emerging Churches.”²¹ “Rooted in the work of N. T. Wright, emerging churches embrace the gospel of the kingdom as revealed in Mark 1:15-16. At the outset of the Gospel narrative, the good news was not that Jesus was to die on the cross to forgive sins but that God had returned and all were invited to participate with him in this new way of life, in this redemption of the world... the kingdom is present wherever Jesus is present. Each person experiences the kingdom through God’s invitation, healing, and restoration.”²² The intent of this experience is to share it with others. Gibbs emphasizes what he calls the *missio Dei* to create the gospel of the kingdom as the primary purpose of Scripture. The purpose and intent of the Scriptures within emerging churches is to: “(1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the strange, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.”²³ His goal of changing “the way we do church” necessarily alters the focus of the church and her apostolic Word.

Leonard Sweet, author a number of books representing the emergent church, is of special interest considering recent speaking engagements for the LCMS. His approach targets communication to the postmodern audience. In this discussion, his understanding of the proper use and understanding of Scripture is revealed. For example, in “Postmodern Pilgrims” Sweet advocates the “double ring”, that is what he considers the faculty of listening to the voice of God through the Scriptures and the voices of men and women around us, with the purpose ...to discover how they relate to each other.”²⁴ The result of this “double listening” is that our context requires us to move transform our model of church into one that is “biblically absolute but

culturally relative: Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven, Connected.”²⁵ He argues for an absolute understanding of Scripture that is tailored with greater weight on understanding the hearer in order to be effective.

III. The Lutheran Word in response²⁶

In the contribution to the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series entitled “Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace”²⁷, David P. Scaer rightly confesses the Word of God in terms of Law and Gospel. But also his definition of the Word of God is not divorced from the means of grace (Baptism, Lord’s Supper, et al) or His church or his means of giving His gifts (the apostolic office.) This follows the pattern given by the Nicene Creed, unifying the Holy Spirit, his work of revealing the Son and the Father, who together in trinity are worshiped, who spoke through the prophets, who now speak through the one holy catholic and apostolic church, and grants forgiveness of sins by one baptism, all pointed to the resurrection of the dead and the eternal life of heaven.

The Augsburg Confession does not have a specific article about Scripture. But the signers stated in the preface: “We offer and present a confession of our pastor’s and preacher’s teachings as well as our faith, setting forth on the basis of divine Holy Scripture what and in what manner they preach, teach, believe, and give instruction in our lands.”²⁸ As illustrated by the Augstana, a right approach to practice begins with a confession concerning God, original sin, the Son of God, and justification, and the deliverance of forgiveness in means of grace before discussing the life of the Christian, the church, and the various practices of the church.

The Lutheran approach is first concerned with its confession of Jesus and which Jesus specifically. What was Jesus’ mission and purpose? Was it foremost as moral teacher, enabler, or

righteous example? The Augustana answer is that Jesus is savior, the gift of God for the forgiveness of sins, whose death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith is granted to us by faith in this Word.

The varied examples from the emerging church movement demonstrate uniformity in regarding reversing the order of operation of the Scriptures as confessed in the Augustana. They perceive the culture as having hermeneutic priority, thus denying the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. While the culture is now postmodern, the condition of sin as confessed in article two remains the same. Consequently the purpose and mission of Christ has not changed. “We know that the Son of God has come and given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”²⁹

While the practices of the emergent persuasion are debatable in their appropriateness, a worthy critique must consider the impact upon the institutions of Christ first and consider non-essential practices (*adiaphoron*) separately. Namely absent from all the emerging authors cited was any consideration of the means of grace. Their anti-institutionalism necessarily avoids any mandated institution of Christ, including the Holy Ministry and the Sacraments. This requires a fundamental denial of the validity of Scripture, relativizing the means of grace as an appropriate expression for the early church but unnecessary now (although perhaps useful for some.)

An implicit rejection of original sin is present in emergent thought with a fundamental denial of Baptism. Success is measured not by a Christian death into eternal life but instead improvement of the world in social class, ecology, and peaceful living. Mere participation in the experiential services offered are the means of grace for the emerging church. These experiences

can be any number of ancient practices and even non-Christian ones. Knowledge and wisdom are secondary to action. In the pursuit of relevance, they neglect the means which God has given to experience His salvation through washing and eating and drinking.

In neglecting the means and also justification, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article with which the church stands or falls, the emerging church necessarily rejects the apostolic office. If Christ is not about forgiveness of sins and delivering this gift to us, then the apostolic office is rejected. There is no need for confidence or assurance that Christ is present. Christ is found in His Word and *also* in culture according to the emerging movement. Consider Leonard Sweet's "Soul" series, where the primary exegesis for preaching is not from our Lord's Word but from secular culture, including art, fiction, philosophy, and popular media.³⁰ In the rejection of the office of apostle, the postmodern emerging exegete is allowed freedom to interpret according to his own perception, without being utterly dependent on and subject to the authoritative prophetic and apostolic Word.³¹

The Word of God in the thought of McLaren is not the sole means of creating faith but conversation and Christian love are afforded the same creative power. Kimball grants some leeway to the Spirit but only in so far as our experiences confirm and create the same faith. By rejecting the content of faith being solely a product of the apostolic Word, both McLaren and Kimball create a free-floating Spirit, with no assurance of where and will he speaks. By the altered focus, the preacher's task is not merely proclamation as God's organ (*causa instrumentalis*) but rather all emphasis is placed on the preacher's charisma and rhetoric. Effective preaching is only so if the man is specially endowed with gifts. The Holy Spirit is given short shrift.

With the exegete-the-culture tact of Sweet, we witness a real danger of syncretism. His approach of assimilating the surround culture makes delineation between God's Word and the false words of world religion difficult. "A globalization of evangelism "in connection" with others, and a globally "informed" gospel, is capable of talking across the fence with Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim—people from other so called "new" religious traditions ("new" only to us)—without assumption of superiority and power. One Caribbean theologian has called this the "decolonization of theology."~It will take a decolonized theology for Christians to appreciate the genuineness of others' faiths, and to see and celebrate what is good, beautiful, and true in their beliefs without any illusions that down deep we all are believers in the same thing."³² Also "the power of small groups is in their ability to develop the discipline to get people "in-phase" with the Christ consciousness and connected with one another."³³

IV. Conclusion

Lutheran authors have begun to critique the emergent movement. Ironically it appears that the movement is fading in popularity as quickly as it arose. Mark Driscoll of Seattle's Mars Hill Church and a former emergent has distanced himself from McLaren over his understanding of Scripture and Christ and presents a more moderate approach.³⁴ Yet, the ideology continues. Some within the LCMS have advocated assimilating the practical ideas of this movement.³⁵

Difficulty arises in forming an effective critique because emergents are resistant to the creation either systematics or dogmatics texts. Despite this, the emergents prolific writing make easy the task of gleaning a confession of the Word of God. From these writings, we recognize their consistency with the theological trends of the 19th and 20th century including gospel reductionism.

The clear writings of Lutheran dogmaticians responding to past errors continue to bear upon this seemingly new emergent ideology. While the emergent church neglects the relationship of practice to theology, those who assume their practices might forget this relationship and so assume emergent theology. A continued dogmatic response to trends in contemporary American evangelicalism. The Christian confession of the Word of God is bound to the means of grace, the forgiveness and eternal life of sinful man.

Endnotes

¹ For an excellent overviews see Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html>>, Feb 2007; D. A. Carson, “The Emerging Church,” *Modern Reformation* vol. 14, no. 4 (July/August 2005): 11-18; John T. Pless “Emergent Church Ecclesiology”, Francisco, S., Adam et.al. *Theologia Et Apologia*. City: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007.

² “I thought that the book would tell me that emerging churches are not necessarily focused on systematic theology. And certainly, all five contributors emphasize that the emerging church emphasizes relationships and practical theology that reacts to the prevailing culture. In light of that, a couple of the authors suggest that theology is a highly local thing responding to local issues and concerns. However, upon reading the chapters, you quickly discover that the authors do subscribe to ‘real theologies.’ They are all committed Christians but they also reflect their seminary training.” Terry Dittmer, “Review: Emergent Theology,” <<http://www.youthsource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1204>>.

³ “Strengthening congregations’ mission and ministry is a major point of preliminary proposals offered by the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance,” <<http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=13934>>; “St. Louis sem to host ‘Day of Reflection’,” <<https://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=11377>>; “YM2008 to explore young-adult ministry with theme ‘Emergent? From What?’,” <<http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=12575>>; Also consider the required readings for Concordia Theological Seminary Missions course Spring 2006: Gibbs, Eddie. *Churchnext*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000.; Schwarz, a., Christian et.al. *Paradigm Shift in the Church*. City: Churchsmart Resources, 1999.

⁴ “He [Dan Kimball] writes from a non-denominational background and at times it is quite obvious, especially when he discusses emerging worship. He talks of a "seeker-sensitive" worship style (a few praise songs, prayer, message, and a few more songs in a warehouse style room) that is unfamiliar to most liturgical Lutherans. He embraces many things that are already incorporated into our worship and church life, and seeks to breathe new life into liturgical music, stained glass, and incense in the worship of our Lord. Kimball's perspective on liturgy and the arts can inspire an enhanced use of these rich traditions. As youth workers we are reminded that liturgy isn't a problem for youth in worship. When used appropriately, it can be a meaningful journey through Scripture... As much as possible, Kimball sets aside doctrinal differences and doesn't dive into the theological problems often associated with his emerging contemporaries... It's a book that you can talk to--writing in the wide margins, scribbling notes to yourself, and jotting thoughts to share with your co-servants are highly encouraged. As I read, I thought about the worship that I organize for youth retreats, the presence I have in the community around my church, and the way I develop student discipleship... From my twenty-something millennial-generation perspective, I felt like Kimball was explaining my world. He described ministry ideas that fit my personality, my goals, and my desire to evangelize my friends... As my senior pastor read *The Emerging Church*, he gained a better perspective on my ministry ideas. He appreciated the clear explanation of where the lost twenty and thirty-somethings have gone and the inspiration to use ancient traditions to reach them. After borrowing my copy for a few weeks, my senior pastor came into my office and said, "I liked it so much, I bought my own copy!" I am hopeful that great things are about to emerge.” Alaina Kleinbeck (LC-MS D.C.E.), “Review: The Emergent Church,” <<http://www.youthesource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1203>>.

⁵ ““Defining the emerging church is like nailing Jell-O to the wall,” the authors write. “The ‘what’ and ‘who’ of the movement are almost impossible to define.” ... Because emergent beliefs are so amorphous—as a result of complying to postmodernism—it is impossible for its teachers to assert their beliefs absolutely... Writers such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Peter Rollins, and Rob Bell are quick to write off historical doctrines and hesitant to assert anything other than approximate truths. Thus the emergent tone is dismissive, even when under the guise of profundity. And many of the challenges and inconsistencies of the emergent movement stem from the fact that it has intentionally not built itself on any foundation—an effort to avoid proposition, metanarrative, and tradition.” Kristen Scharold, “The Emerging Church and Its Critics,” <<http://firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=1068>>, May 14, 2008, citing Deyoung, Kevin, and Ted a. Kluck. *Why We're Not Emergent*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008.

⁶ McLaren, Brian. *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, ... Anabaptist/Anglican, Metho*. City: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006, p. 177.

⁷ See <<http://www.sojourners.com>> and <<http://www.everythingmustchange.org>>

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 185

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.190.

¹² Sweet, Leonard et.al. *Church in Emerging Culture*. Zondervan Publishing Company, 2003, p. 191-230.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 198-205.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁷ Kimball, Dan. *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 14-15.

¹⁹ Kimball provides a brief aside before continuing: “Of course, no matter how we teach or preach, it is the Spirit of God who does the convicting (John 16:8) and guides people to all truth (John 16:13),” *ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 216.

²¹ Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

²² *ibid.*, p. 54.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁴ Sweet, Leonard. *Post-Modern Pilgrims*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000, xvi.

²⁵ *ibid.*, xxi.

²⁶ Brian D. McLaren does not include “Why I Am A Lutheran” in his long list of subtitles to his work. Despite this oversight, McLaren gives a Lutheran hat tip and a criticism in his short discourse on the phrase “Word of God.” He states: “If you want a feel for the richness of the phrase ‘Word of God,’ ask the Lutherans; it’s a secret that their tradition seems to know without knowing that it knows.”

²⁷ Scaer, David P. *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics: Volume VIII. St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2008.

²⁸ AC, Preface, 8.

²⁹ 1 John 5:20 ESV

³⁰ Sweet, Leonard. *Soulsunami*. City: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2001; Sweet, Leonard. *Soulsalsa*. City: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2002.

³¹ Scaer, David. *The Apostolic Scriptures*. St. Louis, 1971, p. 52.

³² Sweet, Leonard. *Quantum Spirituality*. City: United Theological Seminary, 1991, p. 130-131.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁴ “Jesus,” <<http://www.marshillchurch.org/about/jesus>>; “the Gospel,” <<http://www.marshillchurch.org/about/the-gospel>>; “What We Believe,” <<http://www.marshillchurch.org/about/what-we-believe>>.

³⁵ “One of the characteristics of the newly dubbed “emerging church,” is a return to ancient church practice which, for many youth and young adults, means a return to liturgy and its more formal structure. Indeed, it’s not so unusual to find that teens prefer a liturgical service and more traditional hymnody over against praise bands and praise choruses. There are a lot of middle age, boomer types who don’t really understand this, who prefer to believe that amplified praise music is what youth and young adults prefer. It’s not that teens reject the more ‘contemporary’ out of hand. But, they are definitely attracted to what many consider traditional, liturgical and mysterious, even mystical, aspects of the faith...Lutherans, with their very strong liturgical worship practice, could stand in the liturgical forefront of what some are calling the ‘emerging church’ and its seeming tendency towards ritual. Along with Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and the Orthodox, we have what many are looking for. This trend to a return to liturgy is very real and, in fact, many have noted that the Orthodox church is one of the fastest growing in this country because of its liturgical traditions including the use of lots of candles, incense and icons”, Terry Dittmer, <<http://www.youthesource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1200>>.