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*Seeking to Do One Thing Well:  
A Response to Three Helpful Reviews*



*Brian McLaren*

It is both humbling and an honor to have three thoughtful Christian scholars/leaders respond to my recent book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and especially to have them do so in a way that is not only charitable and generous but also insightful and instructive. Writing books occasionally reveals what the writer knows; but more often it reveals what he or she is ignorant about. As someone who has been infected with the biblical injunction to seek wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, I must begin with sincere thanks to Dr. Thomas N. Smith, Dr. John Frame, and Dr. Elmer Colyer, along with Dr. John Armstrong, for this opportunity for responsible Christian dialogue over my work, which has proven to reveal a little knowledge, perhaps, and much ignorance too.

I was recently reading a review of my work written in a tone very different than that of these three gracious reviewers. After some initial shock at the vehemence, I secretly thought, "If I am half as stupid and wrong as this reviewer thinks, he shouldn't be so vicious, because it's not good to beat up on a weakling; it's not right to make fun of people with disabilities!" What a different experience it was to read these responses. I felt respected even when disagreed with; I felt these brothers established in their tone a relationship with me that makes it a pleasure for me to learn from them. And I have been given much to learn and think about. My work in

the future will be enriched because of their helpful, brotherly, and wise input. Whatever minor exception I might take with details of their critique, I believe they bring to light issues on which I failed to be clear enough, or on which I need to do more prayerful thinking, study, and consultation.

I'll offer some specific responses to each reviewer in turn and then offer a brief conclusion.

#### THOMAS N. SMITH

First, I appreciated Thomas Smith's kind and friendly words toward me personally. I believe I would enjoy getting to know each of these three reviewers, and we would have the opportunity for rich fellowship and friendship in Christ. With Thomas, I hope that more people will realize the great value of a narrative approach to Scripture; I know in my own Bible study, discipleship, and preaching, this approach has intensified my love for Scripture and enriched my desire and ability to seek to live by the Word of the Lord.

I've seriously considered Rev. Smith's assessment that, having coming to three forks in a road, I have rejected a road worth rejecting, but have not chosen the better remaining option. I hope that my failure is not actually in choosing the wrong road, but rather that I wasn't clear enough in articulating my choice of the third way that he recommends.

As I said in the book, these chapters poured out as a confession. As a result, I would locate *A Generous Orthodoxy* more in the genre of Annie Lamott's work (like *Traveling Mercies* or *Plan B*) than in the serious theological genre my reviewers were expecting. I tried to adjust expectations in my ungainly title and ironic and excessive chapter 0, but didn't succeed. This confessional genre allows some freedom in style and passion but results in real weaknesses as well, which underlines the need for thoughtful reviews like these and for dialogue like this one. Rev. Smith points out one of the weaknesses that flows from my confessional approach: the book, by its title, promises to be a definition of "a generous orthodoxy," when it is in fact an idiosyncratic personal testimony. Looking back, if I could have titled the book "Notes Towards a Generous

Orthodoxy" or "Stumbling Toward a Generosity Orthodoxy" or "One Sinner's Fragmentary Dreams of a Generous Orthodoxy," I think the book would have raised expectations it and its author were more capable of fulfilling.

In particular, I did not intend the latter sixteen chapters of the book to exclude others from "a generous orthodoxy" if they disagreed with me. Far from that! Rather, I intended to show how each heritage (liberal, conservative, Anabaptist, Anglican, fundamentalist, Calvinist, and so forth) brings treasures to the table of generous orthodoxy—treasures we all should appreciate. I thought I had made my real intention sufficiently explicit, but apparently did not.

Also in regard to explicit clarity, Dr. Smith asks a series of questions ending with, "Are there some things that are so far from Christian orthodoxy as to become essentially non-Christian or even anti-Christian? These questions disturb me; they trouble me. And McLaren does not really answer them. This silence disturbs me. Deeply."

Let me say that if Pastor Smith had been my editor, I would have gladly added much more to resolve this deep concern. Yes, there are many things that are so far from Christian orthodoxy as to become both non-Christian and anti-Christian. I regret not making that point more clearly. Those things would include both doctrinal matters and matters of practice. For example, if we deny the Trinity or the full humanity and deity of Christ, I believe we have turned from the path. If we uphold those doctrines but do so in a hateful, violent, loveless spirit, we also prove ourselves to be unfaithful to God and the gospel of his Son. I would repeat the assessment from Hans Frei that John Franke included in his helpful introduction: *Generosity without orthodoxy* is worthless. *Orthodoxy without generosity* is worse. The statement may be argued with, but it serves to point to the fact that if the true message is lived and proclaimed in a harmful way, it drives people away from the truth. In this way, Frei is simply echoing Jesus' words about us being known by our fruit, and Paul's about being nothing without love, and John's about knowing we are in the light if we love one another.

Rev. Smith says, "McLaren is too eager and too willing to let the mindset and worldview of the contemporary culture (in the guise of 'postmodernism') set the church's agenda in theology and proclamation." Again, I wish I had more forcefully expressed my awareness of the dangers of postmodernism. I believe the gospel must be translated into postmodern culture, just as it has been in modern culture. In that translation there is danger, of course: of being neutered or domesticated by the culture. But I can't resist saying that we don't start at the top of the slippery slope when we raise this concern, as Rev. Smith is also well aware. We must acknowledge that we may have already slipped farther than we realize down the slope of over-accommodation to modernity. We must always have the sense that we are not only trying to avoid slipping farther down a hill, we must also try to climb and regain lost ground in compensation for previous slides.

Rev. Smith feels I am "on the 'left' in matters of the environment, war, and social and political action on the part of Christians." The polarization of all people and issues into left and right could be one way in which we have already slipped into accommodation to modernity. As is clear from the book, I am uncomfortable with the tone and priorities of the Religious Right as I understand them from its primary spokespeople, but that doesn't mean I am happy with the Left. I resonate more with the snappy subtitle of my friend Jim Wallis' popular book: *Why the Religious Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. (I could learn a lot from Jim in creating subtitles.) I believe that the Bible speaks powerfully to our need to be stewards of creation.

Similarly, I believe the Bible is at the very least profoundly ambivalent about seeing war as "redemptive violence," and I believe the biblical hope is for a time when nations study war no more. I distinguish my view from strict pacifism, but yet I hold a bias toward peace-making rather than war-making, and I feel I am being faithful in this not to leftism, but to Scripture.

The only time I felt Rev. Smith was significantly unfair came when he called my discussion of the subjugation of

American Indians a dose of revisionist history, and inferred that I had gone to the extreme of pitting "the evil Christian" empire against "the noble Native Americans." That is certainly a mischaracterization of anything I said. Even so, if history has been inadequately recorded, then revision will be necessary. Take, for example, the needed revision of the history of the Congo—about which horrific information was effectively suppressed until the 1980s (see *King Leopold's Ghost*, by Adam Hochschild, for example). Interestingly, one hundred years ago, evangelical Christians were among the most passionate about the injustice of the colonization of the Congo. I hope I am being a "paleo-evangelical" rather than revisionist in following their concern for biblical justice.

I fully agree with Rev. Smith that "Both Europeans and Native Americans . . . were guilty of war, thievery, rape, torture, enslavement and sale of other peoples, and the exploitation of the flora and fauna of the North American continent." I am often naive, but not quite naive enough to endorse the noble savage myth, so I fully agree that Native Americans, like all human beings, are deeply stained by sin. But the First Nations people did not invade England or Spain, steal their lands, despise their language and culture, and push the English and Spanish people onto reservations. There is a significant difference between the magnitude of the outworking of individual and social sin in our shared American history. I believe that just as Nehemiah had to repent for the sin of his forefathers, we must not minimize, but rather face and repent of, the full depth of our ancestors' atrocities and injustices. I believe this because I believe in a holy God of justice who is no respecter of persons, and that "thou shalt not steal" applies to land, resources, and culture. I am quite sure Rev. Smith agrees.

Less seriously, I feel Rev. Smith overstates the case when he says, "In discussing the environment, McLaren seems to lay the *sole* responsibility for the sad condition of the environment and especially the extinction of species at the feet of human beings. Now, that dog won't hunt." I emphasize human responsibility because our biblical call to stewardship

has been under-appreciated in the modern era, and although we can't do much about non-human-induced environmental change, we can do something about things within our power. My criticisms might be facile, as Rev. Smith claims, but I don't think my case is as overstated as he implies. In the end, we agree that man's record toward his fellow human beings and toward the earth we live in and possess as a sacred trust is a shabby, sad, and tragic one."

I very much liked Rev. Smith's summary of the biblical narrative:

McLaren has cottoned on to the main point of the Bible and the Bible story. And it is this: The true God is personal love, and out of this personal love he has chosen to create, save, and interact with human persons made in his image to bring them back from a fallen (a word I like) state to a state of personal love for himself and his creation, including other men and women. This he has done in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of his personal love.

I also agree with Rev. Smith:

What is needed is for people like Brian McLaren and others who share his concern and passion for a pilgrimage towards a generous orthodoxy to talk and listen, critique and encourage, laugh and weep, pray and work together. Those of us who have learned the story, who love the story, who desire the whole world to know and love the same story need to engage in personal, loving conversation with one another. This is a very post-modern thing. But it is more. It is a very generous and orthodox thing. It is a Christian thing.

Amen. I am grateful to Rev. Smith for the chance to do this very Christian thing in these very pages.

#### JOHN FRAME

Professor Frame was kind enough not only to begin with points of agreement, but also with sympathy and even

defense: "It may be worth pointing out that one of McLaren's very negative critics is also one of mine. I would defend McLaren against that critic's charge that McLaren's gospel is 'radically indeterminate.' McLaren does teach not only generosity but a generous *orthodoxy*." This defense is very kind and greatly appreciated because I feel unable, as someone who left a career of scholarship many years ago, to defend myself adequately before scholars like our common critic.

Professor Frame moves on from substantial agreement with many of my emphases to an important question: "Defenders of that creed, like Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, endured terrible persecution for the truths that McLaren affirms as orthodoxy. . . . Would McLaren have joined with him? This book leaves the answer to that question at least unclear." If Professor Frame is questioning my courage to stand for truth as Athanasius did, I can only say that one doesn't write a book like *A Generous Orthodoxy* if he is a complete coward and only wishes to go along with the crowd.

More likely, he is asking whether in my aversion to doctrinal squabbling I underestimate the real and enduring need for orthodox doctrine to be articulated and defended. The best answer is that I hope I properly value the pursuit and defense of doctrinal orthodoxy in my life and ministry, but I apparently did not adequately emphasize this theme in the book, because I believe Professor Frame when he says my answer was for him, at least, unclear and insufficient.

I would affirm: just as Athanasius was concerned that the church in his day was being swept off the path by streams of Greek philosophy, we must be careful lest powerful cultural currents today sweep us up so that we lose our footing on solid ground. Postmodern culture and philosophy definitely constitute one such stream; and I take the warning seriously that my colleagues and I must be careful of losing our footing in this way. But I must add that we are not alone in being in danger. Isn't it possible that modernity and partisan politics pose more danger to contemporary evangelicalism than most people realize? My sense is that Dr. Frame would be well aware of these dangers, but many evangelicals are not as

savvy in these matters as he. (In the case of contemporary evangelicals, I'm especially thinking of Republican politics, though captivity by any party is a danger.)

I hope my colleagues will not become so nervous about the danger of postmodernity to our left that they are unconscious of the danger of being co-opted by other possibly even greater dangers to our right. (They may be greater dangers because they are more subtle or familiar and popular.) I'm quite sure Professor Frame would agree that dangers seldom come in ones.

The interactions of church, gospel, and culture are indeed complex, and I have done my best to read widely and deeply in this subject. I have been especially helped not only by Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, whom I quote in the book, but also by the great African theologian, Lamin Sanneh. He often states that the gospel must be translated into the vernacular to be true to its history and purpose. But the danger always remains that the last culture into which the gospel was successfully translated (in this case, into the various forms of Western modernity) will try to make itself the absolute and ultimate translation of the gospel (ignoring all the cultural translations that went before it and made it possible). And of course, as soon as the next translation defies that claim of hegemony, the new translation (in this case, into the various forms of postmodern culture) also runs the same temptation of making itself absolute. (My understanding of "emergence" is more in line with Dr. Sanneh's idea of translation than Hegel's idea of synthesis.)

Professor Frame (like Dr. Colyer) critiques my "vague statements about how we must go beyond both the false certainties of modernism and the uncertainty of pluralistic relativism to some third alternative." But he "can't find in the book any clear instruction on how to deal with the kind of doctrinal controversy Athanasius faced, beyond general admonitions toward gentleness and self-scrutiny." I agree that this is a weakness of the book. As a pastor, I constantly have to deal with various highly suspect theological ideas—including some that are very well accepted (I have in mind

some popular eschatologies, for example). And of course, I deal with various forms of relativism on an almost daily basis—as does anyone working in today's culture. So I am more aware of the work of defending truth than I may have sounded in the book. But I haven't reflected sufficiently on these issues to write on them beyond affirming the kind of clear and obvious instructions Paul gives to Timothy—about firmly, yet gently and patiently, instructing those who contradict, without being quarrelsome or unkind—which, I believe, my three conversation partners exemplify in these pages.

Professor Frame says my "actual discussions of doctrinal issues are often very weak" and uses my discussion of 2 Timothy 3:16 as an example. He offers his conclusion that "it is important for us to affirm that Scripture doesn't make mistakes, because God doesn't make mistakes." I certainly agree that neither God nor Scripture make mistakes. That may solve some problems, but for me, at least, it creates new ones. Even if Scripture is inerrant, those who interpret it aren't, and it seems that those who most loudly defend inerrancy are too often the least willing to be reflective about the complexities of interpretation. For example, did Scripture make a mistake when it told white slave-owners in the South that their slaves should obey them without complaint, and thus (in their minds) justified their holding of slaves? No: Scripture didn't make a mistake, but its interpreters did in understanding what those texts might mean for them in the nineteenth century. If Professor Frame feels that I don't go far enough in defending inerrancy, I hope he will meet me halfway in urging those who defend it to be more reflective and honest about the potential errancy of all human interpretation. We're both against something worth being against, and I believe we're also both for the same thing: a proper confidence in Scripture that equips us to live fruitfully and worship in Spirit and truth, to the glory of God.

After identifying my treatment of theological liberalism as the worst element of the book, Professor Frame offers this more conciliatory concession:

I don't want to press these theological lapses too harshly against McLaren himself. He admits that he is untrained in theology. I wish he had chosen not to tread into these waters as deeply as he did, but sometimes "uncredentialed" writers like Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis do have insight not given to us official theological academics. And as I said, there is much in McLaren's book that is true and important.

Then he returns to his earlier concern: "But he seems to lack any understanding of what is required to 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)." I would respond that I would be very interested in Professor Frame's advice and instruction in this regard. It seems to me that he would be a far better person than I to address this subject, in large part because I feel he is being both firm and compassionate in his dealing with me—again, a model of the very thing he wishes I had more understanding on. I would also add that perhaps I am contending for the faith in my own way, against corruptions to that faith that are by and large accepted in many religious settings.

Professor Frame does overstate the case when he says, "Rather, he seems to say again and again that we should just forget about defending orthodoxy. I have to regard that attitude as naïve." I would also regard it as naïve, which is why I never said it once, much less many times. I thought he was also a bit unfair in his treatment of my oft-quoted statement about the possibility of there being Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus. Dr. Frame rightly says it would be impossible for a follower of Jesus to worship a Hindu deity, but I never even mentioned worship or implied any such thing: I was speaking more of their cultural identity and whether it would be necessary in all situations for followers of Jesus to reject their culture of origin and identify with the Christian religion—which, in many settings, means something very different from our understanding.

For example, in many Muslim settings, Christianity means (1) believing in three deities, (2) hating Arabs and

being completely unconcerned about justice for Palestinians, (3) endorsing pornography, and (4) believing God had sex with a woman. The word *Christianity* may also be associated with military aggression, racism, or the legacy of colonialism—which the descendents of colonized people tend to minimize less easily than the descendents of colonizers. We might say that new disciples should clarify these misunderstandings and proudly bear the name of our religion anyway, but that's easier for us to say than it is for them to do, and I think we should check our eyes for planks before we examine theirs for splinters in this regard. Professor Frame says, "Once you break with the worship of Hindu gods, there is little reason to describe yourself as Hindu," but many missionaries would say it's actually not that simple, because the word *Hindu* means a culture and heritage as well as a mandate for worship—and the word *Christian*, as I've said, carries a lot of baggage in many settings. At any rate, I certainly agree—of course!—that idolatry is a deadly serious matter, and regret not making that more explicit in the book. I thought it went without saying, but I was wrong.

Professor Frame concludes, "I fear that McLaren has loaded up the concept of generous orthodoxy with so many confusing arguments and unbiblical notions that he is likely to give generous orthodoxy a bad name. That, I think would be a very unfortunate result." I certainly agree that this would be an unfortunate result, and if it turns out to be the case, I will be very depressed for a very long time indeed. I find some small comfort in the fact that my e-mail inbox is bursting with moving e-mails that suggest that at least some people didn't reach the same conclusion as Professor Frame, but rather found the book inspiring, liberating, worshipful, Christ-honoring, honest, and beneficial to their growth as disciples. When people come to see me in person with effusive thanks, and often with tears, I also find a little comfort, even while taking Professor Frame's comment seriously.

I would feel worse about this statement: "So, although I too aspire to 'generous orthodoxy,' I think McLaren's book is often less than helpful in getting me there," except that I think

Professor Frame is already there—and has been for a long time—and never needed my help to get there in the first place. I will consider myself his junior partner in seeking to bring others in our spheres of influence toward the generous orthodoxy that we both believe is needed in contentious, confusing times.

#### ELMER COLYER

Dr. Elmer Colyer's comments struck me as especially helpful and insightful. Like Rev. Smith and Professor Frame, he stimulated me to think about some things I hadn't considered before, and he demonstrated significant understanding of what I'm trying to do in the book. He rightly identifies my motive: "McLaren wants to pry these kinds of readers out of their mental fixities and create space for them to entertain a new thought or two. . . ." Then he rightly uncovers an apparent inconsistency: "The problem with this reading is that this is not the primary audience McLaren says he wants to address." As well, he correctly identifies my intended audience—people for whom contemporary modern Christianity creates obstacles to following the gospel, although I wouldn't want to be too quickly associated with Schleiermacher's project relating to "cultured despisers of religion." In the end, he also correctly resolves the apparent inconsistency: "If this is the real audience, then maybe the provocative, often frustrated, at times alienated ambiance is designed to create resonance or commonality with the primary audience."

Interestingly, he identifies the same problem with the book's title that struck me when I read Rev. Smith's review: "The book then becomes Brian McLaren's *credo* (which might be a title that more accurately depicts the contents of the book)."

I also think that Dr. Colyer is correct that I was writing in part (probably more than I consciously realized) to reassure my "particular 'emergent' postmodern clan or kin"—if not that we have found a generous orthodoxy, that we are at least not wrong to seek it, "after the collapse of both liberal and conservative positions, each tied in its own unhelpful

way to modernity and equally unworkable forms of foundationalism."

I think Dr. Colyer accurately points out a real weakness in the book: that I fail to fully develop my "hologram" of the "seven Jesuses" and fill out "what the multidimensional whole might actually look like." And more, I don't integrate that "hologram" with my understanding of salvation in chapter 4. He is right to ask, "Yet should there not be a bit more coherence between the seven Jesuses McLaren articulates in chapter 1 and the character of salvation he describes in chapter 4?" The reason for this weakness is simply that I haven't gotten that far in my thinking yet, but I hope to do so in the years to come, grateful for the stimulus of Dr. Colyer.

Dr. Colyer raises a valid question regarding what he calls "the apophatic element" of my thinking—my belief that ultimately God is beyond our understanding: "If the apophatic element finally wins the day, how does McLaren know that the 'emergent' is a good thing? Indeed, how does he 'know' that a higher level or bigger perspective is in fact attained . . . on what basis does McLaren discern it?" If I were a secular postmodernist, I would have no good answer to this question. As a believer in God and the gospel, I may still not have a good answer, but here's what I would say.

I don't know without doubt or with absolute certainty that my understanding is a higher level or bigger perspective than I had before. I do, however, have strong confidence and relative certainty for several reasons. Because of my confidence in God as revealed in Scripture, if I "do not lean on my own understanding," but instead "trust in the Lord with all my heart," I have reason to believe that God will guide my path. If I diligently search the Scriptures, I have reason to believe that I will find life-giving wisdom. If I ask my Father for the bread of understanding, I have reason to believe God will not give me the scorpion of ignorance. But I must not do this alone, because our knowledge is intended to grow "among the saints." So I must listen to the Christian community (Western and nonwestern, contemporary and ancient, my "tribe" and other tribes), and more specifically, I must always be open to



the possibility that I may be going astray, deceived or self-deceived. I must therefore listen to wise people—to be open to reproof and correction—especially people like Thomas Smith, John Frame, and Elmer Colyer, who have been kind enough to correct me in a gentle, respectful spirit.

The parable of the talents comes to mind in this regard: If we believe, like the “wicked, lazy servant,” that God is harsh and exacting, we will be excessively cautious with what has been entrusted to us and will bury the deposit in fear. If we don’t believe in God at all such that we have no accountability, we will squander the treasure entrusted to us, treating it carelessly. But if we believe in God as Jesus portrays God, we will work carefully with what we’ve been given and seek to see God’s investment in us grow.

Dr. Colyer spoke of the needed balance between the being (Parmenides) and becoming (Heraclitus). The being he associates with confidence, and becoming with humility. I would wholeheartedly agree with him:

If the history of philosophy and theology teach us anything, it is that there is no solution to be found by gravitating to one side or the other of these age-old antinomies between being and becoming, between the subjective and objective poles of the knowing relation, and between a hermeneutic of suspicion and one of trust.

I agree with his balance. If he feels I have drifted too far toward becoming, I will take that warning to heart and seek to reset my bearings. He acknowledges, “At his best, I think McLaren wants to assert the former (we can know something about God), but temper it with the latter (*Deus semper maior*—God is always greater—is a better way to say it).” His warning and affirmation will help me try to keep this dynamic tension in the future.

Unlike some other critics (fortunately, not anyone in the present good company), Dr. Colyer gives me credit for rejecting relativism: “He passionately asserts that the way forward is a third alternative: ‘the way ahead is not to *stop short* of the

pluralistic phase, but rather to *go through it and pass beyond it*, emerging into something beyond and better’ (287).” But he adds, “the problem is that he provides *no account* of this ‘beyond and better’ or anything about *how it is possible*. . . .” I believe this is an accurate critique—and he is not alone in making it. I hope that a better account can be made for something as yet unarticulated beyond and better than both absolutism (that produced modern atrocities) and relativism (that lacks the backbone to stand up to any passionate resurgence of absolutism, and that is a sitting duck for consumerism, which is perhaps the most passionate absolutism of all). Bishop N. T. Wright also points us forward to an as-yet-undefined “hermeneutic of love,” and I hope that scholars and other creative people of God will seek a better articulation of this hoped for—but not yet possessed—possibility.

Dr. Colyer believes that such an articulation already exists:

Unfortunately, McLaren seems to be unaware that *there already are* other intellectual options beyond the modern/postmodern fallacy of false alternatives: for example, Alister McGrath and, behind him, Thomas F. Torrance, both of whom develop non-foundational yet critical-realist third options beyond modernity and postmodernity.

I have read some of Drs. McGrath and Torrance’s work, but apparently not the right passages. I will welcome whatever I can learn from these and others who seek these “other intellectual options.” I have said elsewhere that I think we will all end up with some sort of critical-realist position, so I would assure Dr. Colyer, if I haven’t acknowledged better options, it’s not because I’ve rejected critical realism: I just haven’t yet come across the better options that he has. If something beyond absolutism and relativism has been mapped out, I’m eager to know about it!

When Dr. Colyer says, “Christians who take seriously the incarnation, the affirmation that the Word became fully flesh, that the Son of God assumed all our humanity, including the

human mind, cannot be as epistemologically skeptical as McLaren is when he gravitates into his apophatic mode," I would respond only that our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters would probably say that they take seriously both these affirmations and the value of an apophatic approach, and they wouldn't equate the apophatic way with epistemological skepticism, but rather with humility and faith. Even so, I have probably understated my confidence in an attempt to exemplify an alternative to what I perceive as over-confidence or triumphalism among some of my brothers and sisters. I hope that my way of life, including my preaching and evangelistic ministry, will speak for what Lesslie Newbigin called "a proper confidence" in my life, even if it is not adequately affirmed in this book.

I wholeheartedly agree with his statement:

The reason why the New Testament is so full of "gratitude and love, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming," is not because of a final negation of all human knowledge before the sheer unknowability of God, but because the mystery of the Word become flesh is so profoundly replete with grace and truth that we can apprehend, even though we cannot fully comprehend, a grace and truth that we will spend all eternity trying to fathom and yet only scratch the surface.

The line from Bruce Cockburn I quoted in the book was a line of poetry, and was not intended as a "final negation of all human knowledge" as if it were the statement of an engineer or lawyer. The late Dr. Stanley Grenz, who became a friend and mentor to me in recent years, introduced me to the robust and helpful contemporary rediscovery of Trinitarian theology, and although I don't see the apophatic way as being so much in opposition to proper confidence as Dr. Colyer seems to, I do believe, yes, that Trinitarian theology provides us fathomless resources for both vibrant intellectual confidence (with humility) and vibrant life and worship.

Dr. Colyer says:

I am somewhat baffled by his linking of "orthodox" with the ecumenical church's "We believe," combined with his warning about emphasizing secondary doctrines, yet then providing us with a rather idiosyncratic list of his own personal "Why I am" as being descriptive of a "generous orthodoxy." Can an individual's "Why I am," rather than the church's "We believe," ever define "a generous orthodoxy"?

This critique again points to a fault in the overstated title of the book, and to the fact that I am simply a local church pastor writing in hopes of serving others in some small way. At this point, I felt the best I could do is say, "Here's what I'm seeing. Here's how I can articulate it." If ten or thirty or a hundred years from now, these personal rambblings play some tiny part in preparing the way for some helpful "we believe" statements that better articulate a generous orthodoxy, I will be glad. My guess is that it will be wise people like my three conversation partners here who will play a more significant role than I in the articulation of statements more worthy of my book's title. To that end, I wish them Godspeed, even as I continue my modest efforts.

Given my limitations, the best I can hope for is to be the second-rate opening act for a better band that I hope will start playing soon. I hope I will be a raving fan as soon as I hear their music playing; I hope I will be willing to decrease so that band can increase as soon as they take the stage. I also hope this acknowledgement will make my personal, idiosyncratic, confessional "hodge-podge" of sixteen descriptors a little more understandable and forgivable.

I was especially interested in Dr. Colyer's analysis of nonfoundationalist argumentation. It seemed to fit what I was doing, although the words "undermining" and "overwhelming" do sound more like a naked Nietzschean will to power than I hope is true of my heart's desire—although (like my conversation partners, and like my harsher critics) I need to search my heart before God about whether what I call a search for truth is actually a power grab: Jesus' words to the Pharisees about seeking "honor from men" call us all

to self-examination. At any rate, Dr. Colyer has given me something to think carefully about. It would be interesting to analyze Jesus' rhetorical strategy in light of these categories. One of my mentors says, "We must teach what Jesus taught in the manner that Jesus taught it," so my instinct is always to look to our Lord's example.

Which brings me to my last response to Dr. Colyer: he says, "McLaren needs at least to come clean and tell us why he employs the kinds of argumentation he does, including the use of 'shock,' 'obscurity,' 'intrigue,' and so on, and how it is respectful of others and not perilously close to rhetorical manipulation." The vehemence of some responses to the book tells me that some of my readers have indeed felt I have been disrespectful and manipulative. I think this is especially true of my chapter on Calvinism. The playful riff on TULIP was not taken good-naturedly, but rather as an insult to something they held precious. True, I do believe that at least a few (not all!) of these brothers and sisters sometimes (not always!) display the kind of excessive confidence that I critique in my book (note the qualifications in this sentence). But whether or not they antagonize others, I was unwise to antagonize them, and I meant no personal or theological disrespect, even when I did beg to differ.

To answer directly Dr. Colyer's question about why I chose the rhetorical strategy I did: back in graduate school, I was deeply influenced by Søren Kierkegaard's "The Point of View for My Work as An Author." In my master's thesis, I traced his self-confessed rhetorical strategy—which he called "indirect communication"—in the novels of Walker Percy, who was himself influenced deeply by Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard traced this indirect approach back to Socrates, who described education as a maieutic practice: it is like the work of a midwife, who gently helps someone else give birth—in this case, to insight. He said that this method is especially necessary when dealing with people caught in the grip of an illusion. Confront them directly, he said, and they will simply call you a heretic or nut. Instead, to be a midwife to insight among those held in an illusion, one must at times be intentionally vague and even

self-contradictory; for even though this will lose the educator respect, it has the possibility—however remote—of actually stimulating one's neighbor to think a new thought.

No doubt in this regard I am often like the person who tries to tell a joke but does it so badly that people laugh at him instead of with him. Oblivious, he concludes from their laughter that he is a first-rate comedian. At any rate, I do not claim to have followed well the great Dane's strategy; perhaps I've been a buffoon. But I hope this explanation at least answers Dr. Colyer's request that I "come clean."

### CONCLUSION

Years ago I watched the movie *Waiting to Exhale*. It was hailed as the first movie that ever told the truth about the experience of the African-American woman. Reviews were positive, even effusive. Within a few weeks, though, a new wave of reviews came out. "This movie completely fails to tell the truth about the experience of the African-American male," they said.

I remember thinking, "One film can't do everything! Give them a little credit for doing one thing well!" Then I realized that, in a way, the critique was a kind of compliment too; the film's success in one area made critics wish it had been successful in all areas.

So, while I am sad that my book did not succeed in many areas, I am glad that for all its flaws it at least did one or two little things tolerably well. And I am grateful for what I've learned from these good men through this dialogue. Their combination of brotherly tone and wise insight have made this exercise a valuable blessing to me, and I hope to our readers as well.

### Author

In 1986, after several years teaching in the academy, Brian McLaren became the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church. Active in networking and mentoring church planters and pastors, as well as in the development of several new churches, Brian is a popular public speaker and

guest lecturer at seminaries and conferences worldwide. In addition to having written for, or contributed interviews to, many periodicals, including *Leadership*, *Sojourners*, *Worship Leader*, and *Conversations*, Brian has authored, or co-authored, several books that address issues of the Christian faith in a postmodern context, including his first book *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*, (Zondervan, 1998, rev. ed. 2000). His third book, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass/Leadership Network, 2001), won *Christianity Today's* "Award of Merit" in 2002; a sequel to *A New Kind of Christian*, entitled *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), seeks to tell the biblical story in a new context. He also is one of five co-authors of *Church in the Emerging Culture* (Emergent/YS, 2003). Brian's 2004 release, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Emergent/YS/Zondervan), is a personal confession and has been called a "manifesto" of the emerging church conversation. He also serves on the board of several ministries and emergent organizations. Brian is married to Grace, and they have four young adult children. He has traveled extensively in Europe, Latin America, and Africa, and his personal interests include ecology, fishing, hiking, kayaking, camping, songwriting, music, art, and literature.