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One of my mentors often says, "Beware of theological success." Do you see what he means? If we feel successful—that we've captured the gospel just right, for example—we are in great danger. Maybe that's why I never liked that old bumper-sticker campaign, where Christians were supposed to proclaim to the guy stuck in traffic behind them, "I found it!"

BRIAN MCLAREN

The church, which is entrusted with the truth, is a body of sinful men and women who falsely identify their grasp of truth with the truth itself. The paradox of grace, that the church is a body of forgiven sinners, both forgiven and sinful, applies to the church's understanding of the truth. At the very point of his confession of the truth, Peter could become an agent of Satan (Mark 8:29, 33). He grasped the truth but immediately made it an instrument of falsehood.

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Where there is no vision the people perish.

HEBREW PROVERB

Where there is only vision the people have nervous breakdowns.

POSTMODERN HEBREW PROVERB

A Generous Orthodoxy or the Garden Path?



Thomas N. Smith

Why I find Brian D. McLaren's latest book to be

Delightful and deplorable,

Funny and sad,

Exhilarating and infuriating,

Reassuring and troubling,

Encouraging and disturbing,

Full of hope and full of problems.

I like Brian McLaren. He is clearly a winsome human being. I even like his photograph. He is caring and compassionate. He is funny and self-deprecating. He is full of faith and passion. He is thoughtful and penetrating. He is in love with God, with his world, and with his race of human beings. He loves the church of God while engaging (as most of us) in occasional lovers' quarrels with her. I think that we could be friends, even good friends, if the circumstances presented an opportunity for this. I even find myself wishing that we might someday become friends.

I like his book. It is a treat. A trip. A romp. It is a great read. Many of the things he says have needed to be said (and many of them have been said) to the evangelical church in the

United States for a long time. He makes his reader think, laugh, cry, and worship.

This can be said of very few books written by contemporary evangelical authors in our day. He writes with clarity, simplicity, and passion. Some of his prose is simply beautiful. He writes with urgency and directness. To quote a Yorkshire proverb: "He calls an ace and ace and a spade a bloody shovel." And through it all he communicates with a profound humility, taking holy things seriously without taking himself seriously. We all could do worse, a lot worse.

McLaren is clearly a serious, biblical Christian writing about serious, biblical, and Christian concerns. And he is obviously on target at many places. He is concerned with orthodoxy. Most people, as he acknowledges, are not. Even those who claim to be are frequently guilty of confusing orthodoxy with a whole ragbag of novelties and curiosities, like "gap theories" in Genesis 1 and "rapture" theories in Revelation 4. McLaren is christocentric, recognizing that the Christian good news is finally and ultimately about Jesus himself. He is concerned to know who Jesus really is and what this means for the whole world. McLaren is aware of the fact that the God often believed in by Christians (God A) is not the God of the Bible (God B; see chapter 2). This is because he has come to understand that the God presented in the Scriptures is not the God of the philosophers. In the words of Jane Kenyon, McLaren has discovered:

*The God of curved space, the dry
God is not going to help us, but the son
whose blood spattered
the hem of his mother's robe.¹*

Furthermore, McLaren sees salvation in a more holistic way, recognizing that God is out to save the creation, not just immaterial "souls." Combine this with the "missional" intent of God to bring the entire cosmos, including the nations of human beings under the loving lordship of Jesus Christ, and you begin to see why *A Generous Orthodoxy* is an important

book dealing with important issues. Oh, and by the way, all of this is the result of McLaren's narrative-theological reading of the Bible.

With such big issues as these McLaren introduces us to his pilgrimage toward a generous orthodoxy and invites all (and only) who are seriously interested to join him.

It is when he continues on his journey that I begin to be uneasy, then agitated, then disturbed. McLaren at this point reminds me of a traveler who, confronted with three forks in a road—two of which are the wrong way—concludes that one of the roads is clearly wrong. "This cannot be the right way," he says to himself. Facing now a decision between two possibilities, he sadly takes the other wrong road. Nor is this to say that there are not many interesting things to be discovered, many glorious prospects to be viewed on this wrong road. It is simply to say, this road will not get him to where he wants and needs to go. How so?

To begin with, McLaren, like the fundamentalists, *complicates* orthodoxy. The early church fathers rightly understood the need to keep the tenets of orthodoxy at a simple minimum. This is evident in the foundational Apostles' Creed. Part of the trouble from early times on is the tendency of fundamentalists, both Catholic and Protestant, to overburden orthodoxy with interpretations that sooner or later become "essential." Having declared his unquestioned commitment to the early creeds and, above all, to Scripture in the early pages of his book, McLaren then goes on for the next sixteen chapters of the book describing his idea of "a generous orthodoxy." But, we are on the wrong road; we have missed the way. There are many interesting things here, some of them curious, some downright peculiar. There are even a few glorious prospects and views of beautiful things. Few of them, however, are essential to orthodoxy. Some of them come dangerously close to being things that, in the wrong hands, insidiously undermine orthodoxy. How are any of these things finally different from "the ragbag of novelties and curiosities" that I spoke of earlier, except for the fact that they are more hip and exotic? In some cases, McLaren has plundered the theological

traditions of particular portions of the church, only to give these traditions a new and bizarre twist (the word may be used in at least two ways), as in his new take on the Calvinistic "tulip" in chapter 12. Can this be the way to generous orthodoxy?

And this complication of orthodoxy has another—and serious—setback. Instead of uniting Christians as the creedal bases of orthodoxy do, McLaren's tenets (like those of the extreme fundamentalists) of a generous orthodoxy will only further divide the church of God. What if I cannot agree with McLaren's views on sin, the atonement, the sovereignty of God, the proclamation of the gospel, the environment, gender issues, political action, and so forth? Does this mean that I am not generous, or does it mean I am not orthodox?

And if I am not orthodox because I cannot accept this description of orthodoxy, does it follow that I am heterodox? Or is there room in McLaren's worldview for heterodoxy? It is at this point that McLaren seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. 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.

McLaren promises to give the church a "third way" that will save us from the extremes of fundamentalism and liberalism. But because he complicates the nature of orthodoxy, he simply does not and cannot deliver on his promise.

And McLaren's "orthodoxy" is decidedly liberal in its direction. This is true both theologically and politically. Theologically, much that apparently motivates McLaren's journey is similar to that which drove the liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: e.g., an aversion to the idea of sin as total human depravity; an aversion to the wrath of God against human beings as sinners; an aversion to penal, substitutionary atonement theology; and an aversion to the sovereignty of God in providence and grace. And there are other things as well that reflect his theologically liberal mindset. I will mention but one. 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. And I say this as someone who is not entirely friendly to the modernist or Enlightenment project. Politically, similar things could be said. McLaren is clearly on the left in matters of the environment, war, and social and political action on the part of Christians. I see this as driven by the same temperamental traits that have characterized liberals (both theological and political) for the past two hundred years: idealism, romanticism, and naïveté. With a real fear of appearing unkind, I would venture the following criticism of this ethos. McLaren's excitement, and even awe, at discovering the postmodern perspective puts me in mind of fundamentalists I have known (including myself) who have hitherto known too little in the presence of those who (presume to) know too much. Confronted with an educated, culturally aware, aesthetically sensitive, integrated worldview, such people often conclude that they have, at long last, "found it." Introduced to a non-foundationalist epistemology, a broader and more relaxed view of biblical authority, and a compassionate and humanized respect for others and for their points of view, it is easy for them to go whole hog and hog wild for the complete "package deal." When this meets with an idealistic and romantic temperament, a personality marked by a love for human beings and human endeavor—music, art, and poetry—or a love of creation and its glories, the effect is dramatized. This, in turn, leads to an uncritical acceptance of points of view that may be biblically deficient or defective. This can be seen in several areas of McLaren's book. Let me mention two.

In discussing the "imperialist" subjugation of American Indians (or the ancient Canaanites by Joshua, for that matter) McLaren gives us a dose of the typical gospel according to *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, characteristic of the 1970s revisionist history on the subject. The evil Christian, "pale, European, penis people" (the phrase is Robert Hughes'), committed genocide against the noble Native Americans out of greed and a misguided zeal to evangelize or eradicate. The

issue is far more complex, as has been documented by T. R. Fehrenbach's, *Comanches: the Destruction of a People* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1974) and Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: the American West Before Lewis and Clark* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2003). Both Europeans and Native Americans (the present acceptable terminology to most indigenous Americans is "American Indian") 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. Not only did they commit atrocities against those outside their own ethnic groups, they did the same against their own peoples. This is, from a biblical perspective, because they were fallen (a word McLaren dislikes) human beings. They were like all human beings—totally depraved.

Again, 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. What the fossil record shows, if it shows anything, is that huge numbers of prehistoric species became extinct without even the presence of human beings. Scientists (of the non-"creation-science" variety) are still puzzled over the cause of the mass extinction of such things as the dinosaurs; theories abound, answers are not forthcoming (nor probably possible). The tragic tsunami of December 27, 2004, shows us what only a small part of earth's unleashed power can do to the environment and the life it sustains. This is because, again from the biblical perspective, the earth itself is subject to the fall of man and the resultant curse of God upon both because of original sin (Romans 8:18ff.).

To be sure, man's record toward his fellow human beings as well as toward the earth we live in and possess as a sacred trust is one that is shabby, sad, and tragic. McLaren is right to remind us of this. There is need for repentance and rethinking on the part of Christians in both areas. But McLaren's facile criticisms fall short. And they fall short in part because of his defective view of human and cosmic evil.

Sadly, many of the same sorts of criticisms could be leveled at other aspects of McLaren's "orthodoxy." My more extended treatment of these two areas is meant to caution readers of this book to think more deeply about these other areas. The fact that his reading and thinking on these two issues are superficial and naïve should make us very cautious in following him in other, more serious, matters. The fact that McLaren is a teacher in the Church of Christ—and a popular one with a large following—makes this caveat important. The fact that he is a wonderful, engaging, persuasive human being makes it even more important. In the case of some who will read him without critical analysis, such a caveat may even prove vital.

But, McLaren's book *could* prove extremely useful for charting a different journey down a different road, the road not taken. This *could* lead to a viable "third way." His theology of salvation is an invitation to see God's saving purpose as larger than "saving souls" and "going to heaven when we die." His is a cosmic view of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ that has endless ramifications for life here, hereafter, and for "life after life after death" (the phrase is Tom Wright's).

This is because McLaren has a theology of creation that supersedes the tired old arguments about creation versus evolution. McLaren wants us to believe that God loves *the world, the whole world!* Hooray and hallelujah! A biblical theology must see redemption *servicing* God's original purpose in creation: to possess a creation that is the home of a family of human sons and daughters who love and serve him in the whole gamut of their lives.

This is the result of McLaren's reading of the Bible in a narrative way. The Bible is the story of this God, this purpose. All of the stories relate to and serve *this story*. As such, the Bible is treated as it was meant to be treated: as a collection of literary works that narrate this story. This permits the Bible to be the complex book that it is. It is not reduced to a collection of propositions any more than it is to a collection of laws. It can speak with precise and literal specificity and consistency (and here McLaren would do well to dispense with the worn-out

canards about Joshua contradicting the Sermon on the Mount and Saint Paul contradicting Jesus in 1 Corinthians 7!). But it can also speak in a more pre-cognitive and impressionistic way as psalms, wisdom, and parable. McLaren can aid us in pointing us to our need to read and hear the Bible in this way.

Moreover, McLaren's emphasis on the Bible being heard in order to affect our lives is fresh and compelling. I suspect that much of the criticism *A Generous Orthodoxy* will generate will miss this entirely. Too much evangelical writing about and teaching of the Bible is more concerned with defending the faith or (as one of my young colleagues calls it) "saving the saved" than it is about mission and ethics. McLaren should be listened to and heeded on this point.

All of this is true because 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.

There is much in this book to criticize—some of it is very serious indeed; but there is much here to praise and implement. What is needed is for people like Brian McLaren and others who share his concern and passion for a pilgrimage toward 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 postmodern thing. But it is more. It is a very generous and orthodox thing. It is a Christian thing.

Author

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speaker. Thomas is married to Kathy, and they have three adult children. He is an accomplished painter and literary critic.

Notes

1. Jane Kenyon, *Let Evening Come* (St. Paul, Minn.: Gray Wolf Press, 1990), 67.