



Emergent Old Fashioned Liberalism

By Bob DeWaay

A just-published book entitled *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* edited by Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones contains 25 essays written by various leaders in the Emergent “conversation.” Pagitt and Jones provide introductions to the various sections of the book. As difficult as it has been to pin down this movement theologically, this book erases any doubts about the key unifying theological perspective of the movement—theological liberalism. It also makes clear whom they see largely as the enemy—evangelicals who consider the Bible inerrant and who preach from it authoritatively.

Because it is not possible to critique 25 essays in the space allotted here, I will just hit the “lowlights.” Instead of listing the authors who failed to declare their stance on key gospel truths, I found it easier to name the authors who actually confessed belief in the truth of the gospel—including the idea of the substitutionary atonement and other doctrines essential to Christianity. There were only two. The first was Dan Kimball, who on page 216 states his belief in the substitutionary atonement. He later states, “. . . nor do I feel ‘unemerging’ in saying that I hold to and will even defend some core fundamental beliefs.”^[i] I am not endorsing Kimball’s essay as a whole but must commend him for confessing the substitutionary atonement. Compared to what is affirmed in the majority of the essays I can see why he has to defend himself against being considered “unemerging.” The other essay that confessed gospel truths was written by Rodolpho Carrasco—his confession, however, was in the context of an essay on social justice. The other 23 essays expressed various themes common to theological liberalism.

The early essays in this book promote deconstruction, life rhythms, an emergent “monastic community,” every imaginable version of subjectivism, while including blanket condemnations of any preacher of the gospel who speaks with authority as “recruiters doing marketing for the purpose of command and control.”^[ii] Somehow, author after author seems to know that those of us who preach Biblical truth with authority are naïve at best and most likely are laden with layers of evil motives that need to be deconstructed. The possibility that some of us preach the Bible authoritatively because we actually believe it to be true and because Christ commissioned us to do so is

not entertained by these Emergent authors. But they see bad motives and Euro-male dominance everywhere.

I mentioned lowlights. Nanette Sawyer explains how she rejected Christianity because she did not believe ideas that Christians were supposed to believe. She mentions what she was taught: “I was taught, for example, that there are good people and bad people, Christian people and non-Christian people, saved people and damned people, and *we know who they are.*”[\[iii\]](#) Perhaps she was taught such things, but her description is a caricature of what most conservative Christians actually believe. Yes, there are Christians, non-Christians and the saved and the lost. We can know the terms of the gospel and have assurance, but we cannot know the heart. Only the Lord knows with certainty those who are His—so we do not know who, exactly, the saved and the lost are as she claims we teach. Furthermore we do not believe there are any good people (Romans 3:10). If you ask a true Christian if he or she thinks that he or she is “good”, they generally will not say yes, but rather they will say that only God is good. If you ask the lost, they often claim to be “good people.”

But Sawyer rejected Christianity because of having been told what she must believe in order to be a Christian. What she longed for instead was the luminous “experience of the Presence.” She explains how she found that:

Nevertheless, I was always looking for ways to encounter God, to feel that luminous Presence in my life. It’s interesting that I can say I am a Christian today because of a Hindu meditation master. She taught me some things that Christians had not. She taught me to meditate, to sit in silence and openness in the presence of God.[\[iv\]](#)

She goes on to charge the Scripture with contradiction and uses it to promote paradox as the “antidote to arrogance.”[\[v\]](#) If we embrace paradox, we will not fall into the trap of creating categories that people are supposed to be in.

The result of such thinking is obvious: We cannot know propositional truth as revealed in the Bible or be certain we are in the category of redeemed people going to heaven because of faith in the objective truth of the gospel. But we can trust our

“luminous experience of the Presence.” These are clear trademarks of theological liberalism.

Sawyer is not the only one in love with ambiguity and paradox. Barry Taylor, who teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary, applauds the fact that traditional faiths are being challenged on their right to have truth claims as well as on their right to speak authoritatively on behalf of God.^[vi] Taylor’s mantra, which begins his article and is often repeated, is “God is nowhere. God is now here.” What does this paradox mean? It means that we are to jettison historical concepts of God: “Faith in the twenty-first century is not exclusively centered on concepts of God.”^[vii] He repeats “God is nowhere, God is now here” a half dozen times in order to tease us into thinking this contradiction is meaningful. It merely means (as I understand Taylor) that the God who spoke inerrant words through the Biblical writers—words that describe Himself, His nature, His plan of salvation and His moral will—is “dead” in the Nietzschean sense^[viii] and some new reality is “emerging” through the Hegelian synthesis which cannot be described objectively. What we can know about the emerging “God” must be gleaned from the questions and needs of the world around us.^[ix] According to Taylor, “static and fixed” categories of doctrine are relics of modernity that must be tossed aside if we are to find the God who now inhabits the gray world of postmodernity.^[x] If you are considering sending your children to Fuller, you might want to read Taylor’s essay to brace yourself for what they could be taught there!

One of the most egregious examples of theological liberalism found in the book is in an essay entitled “The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness – Finding our God in the Other” by Samir Selmanovic.^[xi] His inclusive view was made famous by Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. It is called “anonymous Christianity” and is footnoted by Selmanovic. To illustrate his belief, Selmanovic tells of a tribal chief, Chomina, who refused to convert to Christianity as he was dying because he thought doing so would separate him from his people.^[xii] Here is how this decision was interpreted by Selmanovic: “Moved by the Holy Spirit, people like Chomina reject the idea of allegiance to the name of Christ and, instead, want to be like him and thus accept him at a deeper level.”^[xiii] He claims, “But Christianity’s idea that other religions cannot be God’s carriers of grace and truth casts a large shadow over our Christian

experience.”[\[xiv\]](#) The Holy Spirit, according to the Bible, testifies of Christ (**John 15:26**). The Spirit doesn’t lead people to reject the person and work of Christ as defined in the Bible so that people can somehow ontologically meet “Christ” through other religions, as the inclusivists like Rahner and Selmanovic claim.[\[xv\]](#) States Selmanovic, “The godliness of non-Christians is not an anomaly in our theology.”[\[xvi\]](#) Our response to all this is simple: The Bible warns about those having a form of godliness but deny its power (**2 Timothy 3:5**).

Another of the essays is written by Dwight J. Friesen whose biography states that he, “. . . serves on the Faith and Order Commission for the National Council of Churches.” His essay is entitled “Orthoparadoxy – Emerging Hope for Embracing Difference.”[\[xvii\]](#) His claim is that embracing paradox and contradictions is “walking in the way of Jesus.”[\[xviii\]](#) A common theme of theological liberalism is that having certainty about one’s theological beliefs is arrogant or naïve and that Christianity is not about doctrine, but the practice of ethics modeled after the life of Jesus. Friesen’s application of this concept states, “Jesus did not announce ideas or call people to certain beliefs as much as he invited people to follow him into a way of being in the world.”[\[xix\]](#)

The liberal church I grew up in had pastors who did not believe that the lost went to Hell or that we could know God’s will; rather we were to be “good people” and to make the world a better place. We could have a rough idea about what “good” meant from certain parts of the Bible, such as the Sermon on the Mount, but we couldn’t be sure about things such as the blood atonement. Friesen’s essay and most others in this Emergent book echo that same theme. Supposedly, beliefs are a paradox of contradictions but we can build an ethic out of such paradoxes. We’re sorry, but contradictions are meaningless. Ethics do not come from paradox and contradiction; they come from the clear teachings of the Bible. But Friesen says, “Part of the hope signified by the existence of the Emergent Village is an ethic of orthoparadoxy.”[\[xx\]](#) Evidently a fan of the Hegelian synthesis, Friesen, using his own emphasis, says: “*The more irreconcilable various theological positions appear to be, the closer we are to experiencing truth.*”[\[xxi\]](#) Try applying that principle to Paul’s debate with the Galatian Judaizers! What exactly does the contradiction between salvation by faith and salvation by works synthesize into? Paul anathematized them and asserted his gospel to be true. How unemergent of him.

Space forbids more critiquing of these essays. We could deal with the social gospel, the feminist gospel, the green gospel, and various other versions of theological liberalism found in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, but the reader gets the idea. I am not shocked that theological liberalism exists; it was the religion of my youth. I am not shocked that many people embrace theological liberalism; it's been here for 130 years or more. I am not shocked that the leaders of the Emergent movement embrace theological liberalism. But I am shocked that people like Brian McLaren are called "evangelical" in national publications. If these beliefs are indeed "evangelical" then liberalism and evangelicalism have become synonymous. Perhaps they have. But in any case, the term Emergent is clearly linked to theological liberalism. Those involved in the movement who are not theological liberals should read this book and conclude that they do not belong in the movement. If they continue to call themselves Emergent or even Emerging they will be seen as liberals whether they like it or not.

I have met both Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones. They are very nice people who appear to be sincere in their beliefs. They work hard to reach out to people and indeed are willing to enter into theological debate. Doug and I debated in front of a large audience. I am not out of bounds by saying that both Pagitt and Jones see traditional evangelicalism such as I represent to be hopelessly mired in Enlightenment Rationalism and often wed to consumerism and religious marketing. The first charge is false in my opinion. The second is based on the false idea that preaching the truth of the Bible authoritatively is not evidence of a sincere belief in the truth, but of insincere motives that are designed to subjugate people. But those of us who actually believe the Scriptures sincerely believe that faith in the truth of the gospel is liberating and not demeaning. It was Jesus who said that the truth would set us free.

Though they are searching for a new way to follow Jesus, the shore upon which Pagitt, Jones and their essay writers have beached their Emergent craft is the island of theological liberalism. Be warned if you choose to embark on such a journey.

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- [i] Dan Kimball, “Humble Theology – Re-exploring Doctrine While Holding On to Truth” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones editors (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 223.
- [ii] For example see the essay “Meeting Jesus at the Bar – or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Evangelism” by Heather Kirk-Davidoff where she rejects evangelicals who offer Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as the means to avoid damnation and accuses them of being “recruiters” who are doing “marketing.” She also embraces Yoga. “*Emergent Manifesto pp. 34 – 40.*
- [iii] Nanette Sawyer, “What Would Huckleberry Do? A Relational Ethic as the Jesus Way” in *Emergent Manifesto*, 42, 43.
- [iv] Ibid. 44.
- [v] Ibid. 47.
- [vi] Barry Taylor, “Converting Christianity The End and Beginning of Faith” in *Emergent Manifesto* 165.
- [vii] Ibid.
- [viii] Ibid.
- [ix] Ibid. 170.
- [x] Ibid. 169.
- [xi] Selmanovic’s essay is found on pages 190 – 199.
- [xii] Ibid. 190.
- [xiii] Ibid. 191.
- [xiv] Ibid.
- [xv] See *ibid.* 194 n8.
- [xvi] Ibid. 196.
- [xvii] Dwight J. Friesen, *Emergent Manifesto* 201 - 212.
- [xviii] Ibid. 203.
- [xix] Ibid. 205.
- [xx] Ibid. 206.
- [xxi] Ibid. 208.

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