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THE EMERGENT CHURCH

A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES

PUBLISHED BY TRUTH AND TIDINGS



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In May 2007, an unknown Canadian author by the name of William P. Young self-published his first novel with the help of two friends. Despite the paltry initial marketing budget of \$300, it spent 120 weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list including 52 weeks at #1; no mean feat for a book originally intended as a Christmas present for family. The book is called, *The Shack*.

The Shack received widespread literary acclaim, but its impact was far greater than the average best-selling novel. The passage of time has demonstrated that its publication was a catalyst for transforming the “emerging church” from a little known anti-evangelical protest movement regarded with deep suspicion, to the widely accepted and pervasive influence on mainstream Christianity that it is today. Though not the author’s intention, a combination of coincidence and clever marketing has quickly rendered *The Shack* one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of the “emerging church” movement, which is currently engaged in an all out assault on what it refers to as “fundamental evangelicalism.”



Emerging Manifesto

Behind the cover of vivid imagery and an emotionally charged narrative, lies a subtle and dangerous allegory making *The Shack* as much a doctrinal textbook as anything originating from the pen of the movement’s theologian-in-chief, Brian McLaren. Influential leaders such as Eugene Peterson (translator of *The Message Bible*) have likened its impact to that of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, while Michael W. Smith (contemporary Christian musician) has likewise given it his full endorsement. While much of the teaching is presented under the guise of harmless fiction, it belies an agenda paralleled by that of the “emergent church,” which seeks to redefine much of what the Scriptures lay as foundational; the Christ of God; the Word of God; the House of God; and the Gospel of God. The shared strategy is to

adopt the “neo-evangelical” method of avoiding “separatism,” the Biblical truth that Christians are to be distinct and different from the world (2Cor 6:17; 1Peter 1:16) in favor of “reclaiming the secular space,” a type of Christianity which not only accepts worldliness but redefines it as “spiritual.” In the process of seeking to present a more attractive and palatable Christian proposition to the so-called “unchurched,” the very character of God is being redefined.

Emerging or Emergent?

But what is the “emerging church?” More conservative advocates take great care to distinguish between the “emerging” and “emergent church,” while opponents tend to treat them synonymously, referring to both as the “postmodern” church (due to its tendency to imbibe contemporary culture). Proponents of the “emerging church” merely identify it as an ecclesiastic response to a “postmodern” society. According to Mark Driscoll (a leader in the “emerging church”) there are four strands to the movement as a whole. Firstly, the “emerging evangelicals” who hold to core Biblical doctrine but seek to make themselves and their churches as culturally relevant as possible, by incorporating novelties such as secular music and conversational preaching. Next is the “house church” movement which avoids forming large congregations, choosing instead to meet in homes, coffee shops, or via the Internet. Thirdly, are the “emerging reformers,” including Driscoll himself, who hold to reformed traditions but embrace the use of charismatic gifts. Defenders of the “emerging church” movement contend that despite the presence of unbiblical practices, inappropriately worldly lifestyles, and irreverent gatherings, the core Biblical foundation of these three strands (forming the emerging church) is basically sound.

Emergent Rejection

Providing a definition of the fourth strand of the “emergent church” is extremely difficult (a task described by one commentator as “nailing Jell-O to the wall”) due to its chosen policy of promoting ambiguity and avoiding dogmatic doctrine. It is by far the largest and most dangerous strand and is led by men such as Brian McLaren,

Rob Bell, and Doug Pagitt in North America, and Peter Rollins and Steve Chalke in the UK. Some of its fiercest critics are found within the “emerging church” (the first three strands), which rejects much of the emergent protestation at the uncompromising doctrinal stance of “fundamental evangelicalism,” but especially its tendency towards universalism and a postmodern denial of absolute truth. This and future articles in this series put the spotlight on the “emergent church,” due to the dangerous philosophical and cultural views it has imbibed, and the particular form of erroneous liberal theology it espouses.



Cultural Origins

To properly understand the origins of the “emergent church” a little history is necessary. How did postmodernism, the philosophy behind the “emergent church,” come to hold sway in our western culture? Historians contend that the 18th century “enlightenment” ushered in a period of history called “modernism,” an era in which man’s own ability to think rationally and establish evidence based on research and logic, provided a sense of legitimacy and authority, and, ultimately, absolute truth. The accompanying scientific progress and material prosperity was expected to usher in a utopian age, a notion discredited by the advent of two world wars and the resultant extermination of millions of people. This human tragedy caused the next generation of philosophers to assert that the concept of absolute truth (something true at all times, in all places, for all people) was a figment of religious and rational man’s imagination. Instead, truth was redefined as “relative” (dependent on individual perspective). So, of necessity, were ethics and morality. As a consequence of this philosophical shift, the second half of the 20th century was characterized by hedonism (pleasure defines meaning), egoism (position defines meaning), materialism (wealth defines meaning), and nihilism (there is no meaning). These societal features have created post-Christian generations (known to historians as generations X and Y) that are marked by very little comprehension of right and wrong, a pluralistic attitude to religion, and a skewed view of morality. In addition, the impact of globalization and, in particular, the effect of the Internet in democratizing and pluralizing society cannot be

overstated. Youth today can download, direct to their Smartphone, an eclectic mix of global music via iTunes, homemade YouTube video, and “open source” information via Wikipedia. This is postmodernity, and it is to this post-Christian, “digitally native” generation that the “emergent church” seeks to make itself relevant.



Church Origins

The “emergent church” is regarded in the US as a protest against the prescriptive management techniques of the “seeker sensitive” movement started in the mid-1990s. In the UK it is traced back further to the “alternative worship” movement, rooted in the urban club scene of the mid 1980s. Church historians assert that the early developments were made in the UK due to its more aggressive spiritual decline, but the recent developments resulting in its mainstream acceptance have occurred as a result of the strident movement in the US. At present it is a phenomenon confined to the Anglo-American world, with some traction in English speaking countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Emergent thinkers such as Brian McLaren and Rob Bell expend great energy (and ink) progressing their agenda by asserting that Christianity has been hijacked by the rational and dualistic thinking of modernism, and in so doing has become divorced from the “God of the Bible.” It is to solve this conjectured problem that they focus their attention with much enthusiasm and not a little presumption.



Going Mainstream

A common misconception with regard to the “emergent church” is the assumption that it has already peaked, an argument advanced in the light of the rapid decline in Internet traffic it has generated of late. This could not be further from the truth. Those with responsibility for the teaching and shepherding of local assemblies (and especially the young) need to be aware that like the older New Age and Word-Faith movements before it, the “emergent church” has instead gone “mainstream,” and in so doing has already become “the norm,” thus making it far more dangerous. A recent “emergent” conference in San Diego was sponsored by popular publishers

Zondervan and InterVarsity Press, and attended by 1,500 pastors from across North America. It featured Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Shane Claiborne; they appeared alongside more “traditional” evangelicals such as Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and John Ortberg. It is very much alive.

In summary, the “emergent church” is marked by a denial of absolute truth, a protestation against philosophical modernism, and a rebellion against the church doctrine and practice of mainstream evangelicalism, all of which is facilitated by a deliberate distortion and complication of the written Word of God. Its rapid growth and widespread acceptance in recent years has much to do with its sordid union with secular society, but also its propensity to employ the storyteller to communicate its agenda.

As Philip Pullman, a popular atheist novelist has stated; “We don’t need a list of rights and wrongs, tables of dos and don’ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.”



Hall, Mervyn

Consider this statement made in *A New Kind of Christianity*, by Brian McLaren, a key player in the Emergent Church: “If the Bible is God’s revelation, why can’t Christians finally agree on what it says? Why does it seem to be in conflict with science so often? Why has it been so easy for so many people to use the Bible to justify such terrible atrocities?”

Does this sound familiar? Young people will be all too aware of this fashionable tactic that starts with a question designed to attack the “literalness” of the Bible and ends with a statement of “fact” undermining its “authority.” “How can you possibly believe that God created the universe in six literal days? Are you aware that science has already proven the theory of evolution?”

However, the quotation above marks a major shift. While this argument is commonly forwarded by atheists, Brian McLaren is a professing “Christian.” In another book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, his attack on Biblical literalness is strengthened, leaving us in no doubt as to his position. While speaking of evolution he refers to it as “elegant, patient, logical, and actually quite wonderful,” going on to describe it as “more wonderful even than a literal six-day creation blitz.” The inference of all such reasoning is that the Bible has been superseded by the empiricism of science, the atrocities of history, and the relativism of philosophy, and therefore it cannot be taken literally and is not authoritative.

Recent church history is punctuated by a litany of attempts to undermine and relegate Biblical authority, and by extension, the existence of absolute truth. This is a direct consequence of the deliberate choice of liberal theologians to attempt “cultural” relevance in the face of the aggressive “secularization” of society. The “Neo-evangelicals” started the ball rolling in the 1950s by questioning Biblical “inerrancy,” the doctrine that the Bible is internally consistent and free from error (Psa 19:7a). The 1960s and 70s were

dominated by the Charismatic Movement, which promoted personal experience and diminished Biblical “sufficiency,” the doctrine that Scripture can provide for every temporal and spiritual need (2Tim 3:16-17). By the mid 1990s, the “Seeker Sensitive” movement had arrived, relying heavily on “market-based strategies” to attract members by addressing their “felt needs” and discarded what was deemed intolerable. It undermined Biblical “relevance,” the doctrine that the Bible is appropriate to all people at all times (Heb 4:12). The conflict of Biblical “authority” with church history is particularly relevant to the Emergent Church, which as well as holding to much of the error previously highlighted, especially seeks to subvert Biblical “clarity,” the doctrine that the Bible can be understood with certainty and coherency (Psa 19:7b).

This conflict is encapsulated in the seed plot of *The Shack*. Mack, the central character, receives a handwritten note inviting him to meet Papa (his wife’s preferred way of addressing God the Father) at “The Shack” (a metaphor for “the house you build out of your own pain,” and the site of the discovery of his young daughter’s brutal murder). As he examines it we read: “He had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God’s voice had been reduced to paper It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book.”

Reader beware! This enlightening excerpt underlines a number of “Emergent” errors with regard to the Word of God. First, is the rejection of the completeness of the canon of Scripture (Psa 19:7a; 1Cor 13:10; Col 1:25), coupled with its erstwhile stablemate, the suggestion of present day personal communication of God with man (other than in prayer and Bible reading), leading to a denial of Biblical “sufficiency.” Doug Pagitt corroborates this by referring to Scripture merely as “a member with great sway [in our community] and participation in all our conversations.” So instead of being all sufficient and therefore the final authority, the Bible is just one voice among many. Will Samson concludes: “Sola Scriptura tends to

downplay the role of God's Spirit in shaping the direction of the church."

Second, we are led to believe that the inspiration of Scripture, from God to men by the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21), who duly recorded it on scrolls allowing it to be later delivered to us in a book, is in some way a "reduction" of God's Word. In support of this, Rob Bell refutes "inspiration" completely, by describing Scripture as "a human product" written by men with a variety of agendas. If this is so, then by extension it is also fallible. God forbid!

Finally, the suggestion is made that overtly logical Christians, in search of "clarity" and "coherence" and infected by the curse of rational modernism, have confined God to a book, thus removing the possibility of an extra experience such as being invited to a "shack." This is endorsed by Brian McLaren who insists that Scripture should not be thought of as a "legal contract," where each verse is interpreted in the context of the whole in order to get the sense, but rather as a "community library" written by a variety of men, from a variety of backgrounds, at a variety of times. For example, rather than Paul writing Romans as an epistle outlining the gospel, consisting of "propositional truths" (statements of fact forming doctrine), it is instead merely "a letter to some people he loves on a subject he loves." It is not to be thought of as a "premeditated work of scholarly theology," formed of "articles and sections and clauses." While it is definitely true that Paul loved his subject and recipients to the extent he wrote to them, in order for it to carry power and authority, its truth must be propositional.

By promoting the role of the writers at the expense of divine inspiration and attacking Biblical literalness by highlighting the supposed "conflicts" with science, history, and philosophy, the Emergent Church has repudiated Biblical authority. In so doing, it has also supplanted Biblical sufficiency, and opened the door to a whole new schema of interpretation. Emergent interpretation overturns the rational and systematic presentation of doctrine with certainty, and introduces ambiguity by focusing on language, meaning, and subjectivity. Before the attack on fundamental evangelicalism can begin, Biblical clarity must be subverted. The key

to this lies in the successful destruction of Biblical authority. This approach is the *modus operandi* of authors such as McLaren, Bell, and Rollins, and is intended to remove the Word of God as a foundation. McLaren even goes as far as to state that “the Bible never calls itself the foundation.” Readers should be aware that contrary to this Paul declares that the household of God is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20).

The attack on Biblical “clarity” goes far deeper than the current preference for ambiguity and moral relativism in our postmodern world, which has been imbibed by “Emergents.” It is in fact essential to their “doctrinal” position. The foundation of the Word of God is dependent upon its clear and plain understanding. In addition to teaching its foundational purpose, Scripture also clearly attests to its own clarity and coherency. Luke outlines his purpose in recording his Gospel, by stating that it was written “in order” (successively or coherently, the same word he uses to describe the whole of the prophets in Acts 3:24) that Theophilus might know the “certainty (firmness or stability) of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1: 3-4). How good to know that in the face of oppressive antagonism, sacred truth is upheld and preserved in the Word of God.

We should not be surprised at the direction of this attack. Long before the “Neo-evangelicals” or Brian McLaren conceived their presumption, the Serpent in the garden asked this question of Eve: “Hath God said?” (Gen 3:1). The attack was on the clarity and authority of a simple divine command, bringing with it a disastrous effect upon the course of humanity. The repetition of this age-old strategy demands that Christians not only be careful as to what Bible version they use, but also discern carefully the quality of the literature they read and the music they enjoy.



Hall, Mervyn

One of the most common criticisms directed at the Emergent Church concerns its handling of the Biblical gospel and, in particular, its tendency to promote the dangerous heresy of Universalism. In the words of one of its most popular advocates, Universalism is the belief that “in the end, all men will be gathered into the love of God” (Barclay, 1977). Although it has been presented in many guises throughout 2,000 years of church history, it has not been widely accepted. But due to its natural appeal to the sentimentality of human nature, it has never finally disappeared, experiencing strong resurgence in the liberal theology of the Pentecostal Latter Rain Movement (1940s & 50s) and, most recently, within the Emergent Church. Despite this assertion writers, such as Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke, have stayed sufficiently distant to avoid being directly labelled “Universalist.”

That is, until the March 15th 2011, when Rob Bell published his latest book, *Love Wins*, aiming to get “at the heart of life’s big questions.” Using the popular tactic of the Emergent Church, he asks a number of questions designed to implant a seed of doubt in otherwise resolute minds and take aim at essential gospel truths such as righteousness, judgment, heaven, hell, faith, repentance, conviction of sin, conversion, and the new birth. He says “Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number make it to a better place and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?”

In the promotional video for the book, Bell goes further: “If that’s the case, how do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe; or what you say, or what you do, or who you know—or something that happens in your heart? Or do you need to be initiated, or

baptized, or take a class, or be converted, or born again—how does one become one of these few?”

Although Bell is careful to steer clear of making any overt statement directly supporting traditional Universalism, it would be mere semantics to deny its presence. Bell’s brand of Universalism is a kingdom here upon earth where human beings “belong before they believe,” and need only to opt into God’s vision of a “desired future.”

In the first of two articles considering the issue of the Emergent gospel, and the particular issue of Universalism, we shall assess some of the questions that Bell asks, not necessarily by answering them (they have been deliberately biased to deliver specific conclusions), but by examining the propositions contained within them. First, what is the purpose of the gospel, and how is this in keeping with the character of God?

“Make it to a better place,” or “torment and punishment forever?”

The manner in which Bell speaks of eternity should be noted. He refers to the purpose of the gospel disparagingly, speaking of the “select making it to a better place,” and the remainder “suffering in torment and punishment forever.” These carefully worded phrases are seeking not only to undermine the reality of a future destination (Matt 7:13-14; Luke 16:23; John 14:1-3), but also its eternality (Matt 25:46). By removing the true purpose of the gospel – being brought into an eternal relationship with God and saved from hell and the lake of fire – Bell is also undermining the Biblical doctrine concerning the depravity of the human heart. We should be clear: the impending judgment of God against the sinner is because of sins that they have committed, born out of a corrupt and defiled nature (Rom 1:18; 2Thess 1:7-9), and is in no way a nasty or vindictive strike at people who choose not to become one of the “select few.” Care should be taken to note the propensity to describe infinite punishment for sins committed within a finite lifetime, as injustice. This is a misnomer: sin is against God, and God is eternal in His character. His holiness and righteousness are infinite. While Scripture

clearly teaches differing degrees of eternal suffering for sin (Rev 20:12), the time period is always the same: eternity.

In a chapter entitled “Here is the New There,” Bell all but removes the distinction between time and eternity, making hell a living reality, something experienced now as a consequence of bad choices, while heaven is the result of living a life in tandem with God. Neither is eternal. In this interpretation God is reduced to merely having a “desired future.” Thus, He is no longer sovereign. Instead, He has chosen to allow human beings to contribute to the destination of history. Despite sharing some of the characteristics of Postmillennialism, this is defined by Brian McLaren as “participative eschatology” (*New Kind of Christianity*).

Emotional examples of hell on earth are used to corroborate the point, such as the genocide in Rwanda, but the logic is flawed. In this case the “hell” that an innocent victim experiences at the hands of genocidal murderers is not just. They did not earn it; they are simply citizens of that country. This is totally out of line with the Scriptural truth of personal accountability for sins (Rev 20:12-13). But in the Emergent gospel there is no mention of universal guilt or personal sin and transgression. Instead, we are presented with vapid platitudes such as the suggestion that how you act is more important than what you are. While behavior is deemed important by Scripture, the cause of that behavior is always, and only, the wicked heart of man (Rom 5:12; Mark 7:20-23).

One of the most alarming themes throughout the book is that at any point one can opt out of their choice of a personal hell and choose God instead. The logical reasoning here is ambiguous, but one would assume that if it is possible to opt out of hell, it is just as easy to opt in as well. The truth of Scripture should be presented clearly; salvation is an eternal act, with eternal consequences. Not only will a true believer never entertain the possibility of opting out, but it is also a spiritual impossibility (John 10:28).

Does God get what He wants?

Having blurred the distinction between time and eternity, the literalness of heaven and hell, and the essential nature of the human heart, the next step in Bell's strategy is to question the character of God. As mentioned earlier, when speaking of eternal punishment, Bell asks "Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?"

Most believers have grappled with these issues at some point, but the answers are contained within Scripture, and are based on a Biblical understanding of the character of God. It is precisely at this point that Bell seeks to employ logic to prove his point. However, this logic is based on a human understanding of the character of God. In a chapter devoted to this subject, entitled "Does God get what He wants?" he posits his argument: "Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants?"

This question is actually a thinly-veiled deductive syllogism, which can be set out as follows.

Major premise: God is God and therefore must get what He wants.

Minor premise: God wants all people to be saved.

Conclusion: All people must be saved.

While the truth presented by the major premise is redoubtable, the minor premise has been deliberately narrowed to ignore all but the will of God in relation to the salvation of mankind (1Tim 2:4), or more succinctly, all but His love. But Scripture also attests to God desiring justice (Psa 33:5), and righteousness (Psa 11:7; 33:5), and holiness (1Peter 1:16), and never one at the expense of another. If Bell was to continue to quote Paul, he would find that a qualifying clause follows: "and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." The truth incorporates not only the love of God, but His righteousness, justice, holiness, and sovereignty. There is no salvation that excludes any facet of the truth.

When the character of God is understood Biblically, asking whether eternal punishment is acceptable to God, or if God can allow it and still be called loving, is not the right question. The better question is, “How does God declare His love while maintaining the full panoply of His character?” In Romans 3, Paul establishes that the cross has demonstrated the love of God in the salvation of guilty sinners, without compromising the righteousness or holiness of God. What a truth we have contained within Scripture: “to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).

The Emergent Church is clever in its strategy. By changing the focus from eternity to time, and emphasizing only the loving attribute of God’s character, it has laid an erroneous foundation for an all-out attack on its real target – the death of Christ upon the cross.



Hall, Mervyn

It is in concord with God's character that the Biblical remedy for man's spiritual malady be salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8), based upon His shed blood on the cross (Rom 3:25). Therefore, it should be of little surprise that it is with this essential foundation of the gospel that the Emergent Church takes greatest umbrage. In fact, its opponents claim that the underlying reason writers such as Rob Bell and Brian McLaren expend so much energy revising the essential character of God, is to subvert the truths they despise the most: the gospel doctrines of propitiation and substitution, sometimes referred to as "penal substitution." Although not a Biblical term, this is the doctrine that Christ, by His own choice, and in obedience to the will of the Father, was punished in the place of sinners, and in so doing has satisfied the righteousness of God (propitiation), allowing Him to righteously forgive sins (Rom 3:26; 2Cor 5:21; 1John 2:2; 4:10), upon the basis of faith (substitution).

Having disabused his readers of the true nature of God's character, true to form, Bell sets his sights on the doctrine of the death of Christ, and with faux preponderance goes to great lengths to prove that the evangelical view that the gospel is all about salvation from personal sins is "narrow." He takes great effort to prove that Scripture uses a number of different images and metaphors to depict what happened at the cross:

"What happened on the cross is like ... a defendant going free, a relationship being reconciled, something lost being redeemed, a battle being won, a final sacrifice being offered, so that no one ever has to offer another one again, and an enemy being loved."

All of these truths are Biblical, but Bell's claim that fundamental evangelicals have revered penal substitution to the point of elevating it above all other doctrines, is to suggest that they are promoting some form of theological competition. More than that, notice the

pejorative language he uses to describe this vital truth, designed of course to undermine it.

“Many have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However, true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God.”

Nothing could be further from the truth and it should be noted that Bell is presenting this argument in such a way so as to create a “straw man fallacy,” which he can then remove with great gusto. He continues:

“Let’s be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from sin and destruction. God is the rescuer.” UK theologian Steve Chalke agrees, taking specific issue with Christ’s payment for sins, making a statement that has become iconoclastic within evangelical Christianity. “How then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and wrath on His own Son? The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing His Son for an offence He has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith.”

In these two statements, Chalke and Bell are not holding back in their attack on penal substitution, but this attack is nothing new. History shows that from the point of Biblical revelation of the first century, right down to this latest attack of the 21st century, via its dramatic rediscovery during the Reformation of the 16th century, alternative theories for the purpose of the cross have been posited. But the attentive reader will note that this is a mere sideshow to two more pressing issues.

First, how should we address this allegation that evangelical Christians have made the gospel solely about propitiation and substitution, making it “small” by ignoring its “cosmic scope”?

In one respect, Bell is right to draw attention to the wider amplitude of the gospel. It is true that the gospel includes the reconciliation of all things in earth and heaven unto the Son (Col 1:20; 2Cor 5:19). It is also true that, at the cross, principalities and powers were spoiled (Col 2:15), and the power of the devil was destroyed (Heb 2:14). In addition, Scripture also attests to the delivery of creation from the bondage of corruption (Rom 8:21). But while we rightly note the vast extension of gospel truth, we should not lose sight of the fact that, initially, the greatest human need is its personal application to deal with sins. Before Paul taught the church at Rome about the redemption of creation, he first emphasized the necessity of their own redemption (Rom 3:24). After he unveiled the reconciliation of all things to the Colossians, he reminded them that they themselves had been reconciled “in the body of His flesh through death” (Col 1:21-22).

Further consideration of key Biblical gospel texts will also present the basis of our personal reconciliation and redemption as the sufferings of Christ. Peter says that Christ “suffered once for sins (propitiation), the just for the unjust (substitution), that He might bring us to God” (reconciliation) (1Peter 3:18). Paul states that our justification is by means of redemption that is found in Christ Jesus, Who God put forward to be a propitiation by the shedding of His blood through faith (substitution) (Rom 3:24-25). Simply put, the apostles draw attention to the fact that the wider application of the gospel does not precede or supersede the necessity of its personal application.

Contrary to Bell’s claims, it is evident that the weight of evidence proves that where Scripture introduces the breadth of the gospel, it is not to contradict or dilute the truth of penal substitution, but rather to emphasize that it is on this foundation that the whole gamut of gospel truth rests.

Second, how do we address the charge that penal substitution is “morally dubious,” and “a huge barrier to faith”? A true Christian would undoubtedly take issue with the Father being described as vengeful, or the Father held responsible for punishing the Son. The Bible states that God punished the Son for sin (Isa 53:10), but as we have seen, there can be no salvation without it. Chalke’s charge of

“cosmic child abuse” has led some to accuse him of blasphemy. Bell seems to agree by referring to those who uphold the precept of sacrifice for sin as “primitive,” claiming that the descriptions used in Scripture are merely “images and metaphors.” Readers should rejoice with the apostle Paul, that although metaphorical language is used in the Biblical communication of the gospel, the suffering of the Son of God was very real. In Christ there was found a willing and able Savior – “the Son of God Who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). The question might be asked: Just what is the purpose of the cross in the emergent gospel?

Victory and example only?

Despite regaling his readers with a number of supposed metaphors, he provides two historical theories in answer to this question. First, he suggests that the cross was used to win a general victory over sin, death, and destruction (Col 2:15). Bell states: “The powers of death and destruction have been defeated on the most epic scale imaginable.”

Second, he suggests that the death of Christ was an example of supreme love (1Peter 2:21) and therefore should be a moral influence on us, causing us to “open ourselves to Jesus living” and enter a “way of life.” As we have noted, Scripture states that, at the cross, Christ was victor over evil forces. It also states that Christ’s death is an example for us. But in both of these cases, as we have seen, neither of these is enough. Timothy Keller helpfully points out: “Jesus’ death was only a good example if it was more than an example, if it was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. And it was. Why did Jesus have to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid – God Himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne – God Himself bore it. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.”

Bell’s assertion that penal substitution presents Jesus rescuing us from God is holed beneath the waterline. Instead, God rescues us from the penalty of our sins through Himself. Just as the cross was more than an example, it was more than a victory over evil. Rather it was the greatest act of selflessness in all of history. “God was in

Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2Cor 5:19).

Without propitiation, God’s righteousness is abrogated. If God’s righteousness is abrogated then He is unjust and, by extension, unholy also. Similarly, without substitution through personal faith, His grace is abrogated. Paul reminds the Romans that the gospel promises are “by faith” so that they “might be by grace” (Rom 4:16). It was the grace of God that provided the propitiation for our sins.

Alternative theories to the penal substitution are designed to do away with the offence of the cross. Let us take note of this important point: the cross is offensive. It renders useless the wisdom of man, whether it be in the form of human merit or religion and leaves him with nothing but the grace of God. No wonder Paul states that it is both foolish and a stumbling block at the same time.

By humanizing the gospel, the Emergent Church is left with nothing but spiritual buzzwords and empty niceties. But it also lacks one other thing; the power to save. Rick Warren’s Seeker Sensitive church did away with the Lordship of Christ in order to emphasize the need to have Him as Savior. The Emergent Church does the opposite. It does away with Christ as Savior and commands us to follow His example as Lord. Both are doctrinally wrong. Without a Savior we have no Lord. Without a Lord, we have no Savior.