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# JOURNEY: ARE THE PILGRIMS STILL MAKING PROGRESS?

**HE WAS SHORT**, stocky, bearded, and twice my age. I can't remember for sure, but I think his name was Chuck. What I do know for sure is that he was one of the best musicians in our little Presbyterian church. Chuck was a former club owner and a talented guitarist, knowledgeable in folk music and the folk music scene.

He would occasionally play the guitar in church, usually for the weekly "special music." Somehow the powers that be discovered that I played the guitar too (though not nearly so well). And so it came to pass that I took my turn and provided the offertory music. I played my Takamine and sang a rendition of Psalm 23. Unremarkable, but not embarrassing, which was about the best I had hoped for.

After the service, Chuck came up to me to talk about guitars and singing and, of course, folk music. I was way out of my league. I taught myself to

play the guitar in college so I could lead simple praise and worship music for our college ministry group. My skills are pretty ordinary—good enough for a church offertory and that’s about it. This man, however, clearly knew his stuff. He talked to me like I was the expert in music that he was. I nodded politely and, out of genuine curiosity, asked him about his past life in the folk music scene. After telling a few tales of people he had hosted (the Indigo Girls come to mind), he told me something I’ll never forget—something that captures the postmodern ethos. He said, “In the music scene it’s really cool to search for God. It’s not very cool to find Him.”

That line has stuck with me ever since as an apt summary not just for the world of entertainment, but for spirituality in the West. The destination matters little. The journey is the thing.

For emerging Christians, the journey of the Christian life is less about our pilgrimage through this fallen world that is not our home, and more about the wild, uncensored adventure of mystery and paradox. We are not tour guides who know where we are going and stick to the course. We are more like travelers. Spencer Burke of theooze.com writes:

Tour guides don’t feel free to deviate from the “route” other Christians have set. What’s more, they’re apt to impose that same kind of rigid structure on others. Becoming a traveler, however, enables you to be true to yourself . . . . As a traveler, I am free to love and to be loved. I’m not worried about taking a wrong step or losing my position. I’m just one more person on the journey—a beloved child of God.<sup>1</sup>

The old notion of spiritual pilgrimage used the idea of journey to symbolize our longing for heaven and our place as strangers in the kingdom of this world. As sojourners and exiles, Christians were called to abstain from the lusts of the flesh, “which war against [our] soul,” and to “live such good lives among the pagans that” . . . they “see [our] good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits

us” (1 Peter 2:11–12 NIV). We were supposed to be living in faith, looking forward to a better country, that is, a heavenly one (Heb. 11:16). The journey of the Christian life was the way of the pilgrim fighting against fears and doubts, trying not to be squeezed into this world’s mold, trusting that God has something better for us, even if we had not yet received what was promised (see Heb. 11:39–40).

In much of emergent thought, however, the destination is a secondary matter, as is any concern about being on the right path. “Evangelism,” therefore, “should be seen as an opportunity to ‘fund’ people’s spiritual journeys, drawing on the highly relevant resources of ‘little pieces’ of truth contained in the Christian narrative.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Peter Rollins argues that instead of thinking in terms of destination (we became Christians, joined a church, are saved), we should think in terms of journey (we are becoming Christians, becoming church, becoming saved). Hence, we “need to be evangelized as much, if not more than those around us.”<sup>3</sup>

The postmodern Way, as Leonard Sweet puts it so candidly, is an experience. The journey is more wandering than directional, more action than belief, more ambiguous than defined. To explain and define the journey of faith would be to cheapen it. The Christian faith is not a math problem to be solved, we are told. After all, to quote Rob Bell and to ignore the early Christian apologists, “you rarely defend the things you love.”<sup>4</sup>

### **MOVING INWARD ON THE JOURNEY**

In David Wells’s newest book, he compares the notion of journey in *Pilgrim’s Progress* with the contemporary idea. Christian, he notes, stumbled frequently on his pilgrimage. But by God’s grace he always got back on the path, moved in the right direction, learned what others failed to grasp, and continued on the way. Wells writes:

This is really the difference between Bunyan’s notion of spiritual

pilgrimage and the postmodern idea of spiritual journey. . . . The point of spirituality is in the *experience* of the journeying, not in the *purpose* of reaching the destination. For Bunyan, the pilgrimage is about the certain knowledge that Christians have of “the better country” to which they travel and of the way in which they must conduct themselves on the journey in preparation for the One to whom they are traveling.<sup>5</sup>

Because the journey is an experience more than a destination, the Christian life requires less doctrinal reflection and more personal introspection. The postmodern infatuation with journey feeds on and into a preoccupation with our own stories. If my grandparents’ generation could be a little stoic and not terribly reflective, my generation is introspective at a level somewhere between self-absorption and narcissism. We are so in-tuned with our dysfunctions, hurts, and idiosyncrasies that it often prevents us from growing up, because maturity is tantamount to hypocrisy in a world that prizes brokenness more than health.

I’m not advocating stuffing all our feelings, but we must learn that self-expression and being true to ourselves are not the surest guides to Christlikeness. Sincerity is a Christian virtue, as is honesty about our struggles. But my generation needs to realize that Christianity is more than chic fragility, endless self-revelation, and the coolness that comes with authenticity.

We live in a blogging culture, which suggests that just because we have an opinion on something it must be worthwhile and just because we are in touch with our spiritual journey it must be worth sharing. I know that Doug Pagitt’s book *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* contains journal entries from Solomon’s Porch to give the book a community feel, but how important is it really to know that Erin is a Taurus, but more like a Scorpio, and that Dustin likes Frosted Mini-Wheats, rollerblading, and making out with supermodels, and that he’d like to have a monkey named Scratch that makes leather wallets and flings poo at children?<sup>6</sup> I guess those revelations are funny, but they’re also a funny way

to begin a book about spiritual formation. In the postmodern world of spiritual journey, authenticity and sincerity have become the currency of authority, and dysfunction, inconsistency, and idiosyncrasy are worn as badges of honor.

But talking about monkey poo is not the real problem in postmodern spirituality. Talking about primate excretion is sort of odd, but in the grand scheme of things it's fairly harmless. There are, however, more serious problems lurking along the emergent journey.

### **IS GOD KNOWABLE?**

The first problem with the emergent view of journey is that it undermines the knowability of God. Theologians have long held to God's knowability along with His immensity. That is, Christian theologians of every stripe have understood that we can't understand everything about God. God's knowledge of Himself is called archetypal; our knowledge of Him is called ectypal. God knows Himself exhaustively; we see through a glass dimly. God is infinite; our knowledge of Him is finite. All that to say, no Christian that I have ever known or read has ever claimed to have God figured out. And emerging Christians certainly won't be the first.

But emergent leaders are allowing the immensity of God to swallow up His knowability. In good postmodern fashion, they are questioning whether we can have any real, accurate knowledge about God in the first place. Brian McLaren, in noting his agreement with Tony Campolo, argues that in one sense all theologies are heresies because we can't truly speak of God using our human formulation. What is needed is "not absolute and arrogant certainty about our theologies, but a proper and humble confidence in God."<sup>7</sup>

Fair enough. Who wants to be arrogantly certain about anything? But McLaren posits a false antithesis, suggesting that we can know God personally but can't confidently know things about Him. The former kind of knowing is "personal knowledge." The latter is "abstract, rational, impersonal certitude."<sup>8</sup>

But what does it really mean to know God personally but not know any-

thing rationally about Him? I can't love my wife without knowing facts about her, otherwise my love for her is just love of love, or worse, love for the sake of being loved. Unless I love her for the facts of who she is, what she has done, and what she does, I am loving a shapeless, formless void. No matter how much I rightly stress the importance of relationship with my wife beyond mere knowledge about her, I must have knowledge about her in order to have a relationship. After all, if I don't know any of the "abstract" and "impersonal" facts about my wife (like her hairstyle, eye color, height, etc.), how can I have a

**None of us ever infinitely understands God in a neat package of affirmations, but we can know Him truly, both personally and propositionally.**

personal relationship with her? I won't even be able to pick her out in a crowd!

It matters little how glowingly I speak about our relationship; if I cannot make clear, certain, unequivocal statements about my wife, how good is our relationship really? Prattling on about the wonders of personal relationship while refusing to make defini-

tive statements about the one we love in the relationship is not the kind of talk that honors one's wife, or God for that matter.

I'm sure that emerging Christians would affirm that they know things about God. But their idea of knowledge is so provisional and lacking so much confidence (because the only other kind of knowledge in their minds is cold, linear, and infallible) that it's hard to imagine actually and accurately knowing God except as we experience Him. As Donald Miller says at one point in his wildly popular *Blue Like Jazz*, "I don't believe I will ever walk away from God for intellectual reason. Who knows anything anyway?"<sup>9</sup>

The emergent agnosticism about truly knowing and understanding anything about God seems to be pious humility. It seems to honor God's immensity, but it actually undercuts His sovereign power. Postmoderns harbor such distrust for language and disbelieve God's ability to communicate truth to human minds that they effectively engage in what Carson calls "the gagging

of God.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Tomlinson writes, “To say Scripture is the word of God is to employ a metaphor. God cannot be thought of as literally speaking words, since they are an entirely human phenomenon that could never prove adequate as a medium for the speech of an infinite God.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Bell writes, “Our words aren’t absolutes. Only God is absolute, and God has no intention of sharing this absoluteness with anything, especially words people have come up with to talk about him.”<sup>12</sup>

Such statements fly in the face of redemptive history and nearly every page of Scripture. The God of the Bible is nothing if He is not a God who speaks to His people. To be sure, none of us ever infinitely understand God in a nice, neat package of affirmations and denials, but we can know Him truly, both personally and propositionally. God can speak. He can use human language to communicate truth about Himself that is accurate and knowable, without ceasing to be God because we’ve somehow got Him all figured out.

We may all be, by nature, like blind men touching the elephant without knowing whether what we are feeling is a trunk, tail, or ear. But what if the elephant spoke and said, “Quit calling me crocodile, or peacock, or paradox. I’m an elephant, for crying out loud! That long thing is my trunk. That little frayed thing is my tail. That big floppy thing is my ear.” And what if the elephant gave us ears to hear his voice and a mind to understand his message (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14–15)? Would our professed ignorance about the elephant and our unwillingness to make any confident assertions about his nature mean we were especially humble, or just deaf?

Because of the emerging church’s implied doctrine of God’s unknowability, the word *mystery*, a perfectly good word in its own right, has become downright annoying. Let me be very clear: I don’t understand everything about God or the Bible. I don’t fully understand how God can be three in one. I don’t completely grasp how divine sovereignty works alongside human responsibility. The Christian faith *is* mysterious. But when we talk about Christianity, we don’t start with mystery. It’s some combination of pious confusion and intellectual



laziness to claim that living in mystery is at the heart of Christianity.

Yet, time and again, emerging leaders brand Christianity as, above all things it seems, mysterious.

Mystery is not the enemy to be [conquered] nor a problem to be solved, but rather, the partner with whom we dance—and dance we must. The call for the post-evangelical community is to dance and play the music. But we are also called to show each other the way into mystery. We would certainly be under providing if we didn't offer new ways to enter and live in mystery.<sup>13</sup>

I don't think you can explain how Christian faith works either. It is a mystery. And I love this about Christian spirituality. It cannot be explained, and yet it is beautiful and true. It is something you feel, and it comes from the soul.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not. . . . The mystery *is* the truth.<sup>15</sup>

So, Christian spirituality cannot be explained; we cannot use human language to speak truthfully about God; and the mystery of our unknowable, unfathomable God *is* the truth. That sounds more like the Hindu conception of Brahman than the Christian notion of God, revelation, and authority. True, there are secret things that belong to the Lord our God, but what about the things revealed that belong to us and to our children forever? (Deut. 29:29). What did Paul tell the men of Athens? “I see you worship an unknown God. Great! So do I.” No. Paul declared, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23 NIV).<sup>16</sup>

Mystery as an expression of our finitude is one thing. Mystery as a way of jettisoning responsibility for our beliefs is another thing.<sup>17</sup> Mystery as radical unknowing of God and His revealed truth is not Christian, and it will not sustain the church. As G. K. Chesterton observed, reflecting on the rationality of Christian commitment over two millennia, “People are not amused with a puzzle or a paradox or a mere muddle in the mind for all that time.”<sup>18</sup>

### **IS UNCERTAINTY THE SAME AS HUMILITY?**

The second problem with the emergent view of journey is that it suffers from a confusion of categories. Emerging leaders equate uncertainty with humility. Steve Chalke tells the story of a young man who finally got fed up with theologians telling him that he needed to search for the real Jesus. After one such speech, the young man shouted, “If you academics in your ivory towers have lost Jesus, that’s your problem. I’ve not lost him. I know him. I love him. I don’t need to search for him.” Chalke’s comments on the story are telling.

However, as appealing as this kind of certainty might at first sound, it is in fact rather like the presumed familiarity of which Dallas Willard spoke. To assume that we have got Jesus “pinned down” or “summed up” is not simply arrogant but stupid, and in the end inhibits our ability to communicate his unchanging message to an ever-changing world.<sup>19</sup>

Certainty, for the emergent church, is the same as pinning down Jesus and summing up God, while uncertainty is a breath of fresh air. “Drop any affair you may have with certainty, proof, argument—and replace it with dialogue, conversation, intrigue and search,” argues McLaren. Clarity, after all, is usually boring and wrong “since reality is seldom clear, but usually fuzzy and mysterious; not black-and-white, but in living color.”<sup>20</sup>

But why do intrigue and search have to mean the end of all certainty? McLaren is guilty of a very modern error, insisting on *either-or* when a *both-and*

is possible. There is a place for questions. There is a time for conversation. But there is also the possibility of certainty, not because we have dissected God like a freshman biology student dissects a frog, but because God has spoken to us clearly and intelligibly and has given us ears to hear His voice.

Listen to how Calvin confronted the postmoderns in his premodern day:

But they contend that it is a matter of rash presumption for us to claim an undoubted knowledge of God's will. Now I would concede that

point to them only if we took upon ourselves to subject God's incomprehensible plan to our slender understanding. But when we simply say with Paul: "we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is from God . . ." by whose teaching "we

know the gifts bestowed on us by God" [1 Cor. 2:12], how can they yelp against us without abusively assaulting the Holy Spirit? But if it is a dreadful sacrilege to accuse the revelation given by the Spirit either of falsehood or uncertainty or ambiguity, how do we transgress in declaring its certainty?"<sup>21</sup>

**There is the possibility of certainty, because God has spoken to us clearly and intelligibly.**

Who knew there were emerging Christians in sixteenth-century Western Europe! Apparently, this notion that only arrogance and rash presumption could lead one to speak of God with certainty is not a new idea. And it is not a mark of humility when we refuse to speak about God and His will except in the most ambiguous terms. It is an assault on the Holy Spirit and disbelief in God's ability to communicate rational, clear statements about Himself in human language. What we suffer from today, wrote Chesterton in the previous century, "is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition . . . [and] settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about

the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.”<sup>22</sup>

The disdain for certainty in knowledge is built upon a false dichotomy. The false dichotomy says that you must know something omnisciently in order to know something truly. Stan Grenz, for example, wrote, “At the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by our human liability to error and the inevitable disagreements that follow. Foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty.”<sup>23</sup> But aren’t we capable of knowing truth unambiguously without having to know it with invincible certainty? Carson calls it an asymptotic approach.<sup>24</sup> An asymptote is a curved line that gets closer and closer to a straight line without ever touching it. Likewise, our knowledge of the truth approaches the straight line of God’s infallible, exhaustive comprehension of all things in such a way that it can be called true, reliable, and sure, while it is still not omniscient and invincible.

Paul did not claim to fully understand the depth of God’s wisdom and mercy (Rom. 11:33–36), but that did not stop the apostle from chiding his fellow Jews for having a zeal for God “not based on knowledge” (Rom. 10:2 NIV). Indeed, Christianity is based upon, and the whole Bible assumes, a certain knowledge of and adherence to confident assertions about God and His Christ. That’s why Paul preached in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:5).

Arguing for the inherent uncertainty of knowledge causes problems when you write books trying to convince people to believe or behave in certain ways. That is to say, radical uncertainty sounds nice as a sort of protest against the perceived dogmatism of evangelical Christianity, but it gets in the way when you want prove your point. At some point, no matter how often you rag on cer-

**The false dichotomy says that you must know something omnisciently in order to know something truly.**

tainty and boast in the great mysterious unknowability of God, you will want people to be clear about your beliefs.

Thus McLaren writes, “In one of my previous books, I said that clarity is sometimes overrated and that intrigue is correspondingly undervalued. But here I want to say—clearly—that it is tragic for anyone, especially anyone affiliated with the religion named after Jesus, not to be clear about what Jesus’ message actually was.”<sup>25</sup> So intrigue and ambiguity are good when the ideas in question are ones emerging leaders don’t particularly care for or care about, but when it comes to making their point, clarity is key.

For all the talk of perspectives and uncertainty, McLaren still believes that some interpretations are good and some are bad. He has to. We all have to, if we are to have anything to say. No one writes books or preaches sermons or gives talks or converses in dialogue unless he believes that what he is saying is true, or at least truer than other options out there. What is frustrating, then, is when emerging authors claim the postmodern moral high ground that supposedly eschews reasons, logic, and certain truth claims.

On a related note, I’m not sure if it is rhetoric, intellectual laziness, humility, fear of criticism, consistent postmodernism, or all of the above, but much emergent writing is laden with disclaimers. McLaren’s writings provide many examples. Here’s one from an article about homosexuality: “I am no doubt wrong on many things. I am very likely wrong in my personal opinions on homosexuality (which, by the way, were never expressed in the piece, contrary to the assumptions of many responders).”<sup>26</sup> It may be a sign of humility to admit that your opinions are fallible, but admitting that your opinions on a particular subject are very likely wrong is odd to say the least. Why hold to your personal opinions if you think they are wrong?

Here’s another example. At the beginning of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren describes himself as a lowly English major who snuck into pastoral ministry accidentally. “I am an amateur,” he writes. “And even as an English major I’m a failure. The book is laced with overstatement, hyperbole, and generalizations. I

am horribly unfair in this book, lacking all scholarly objectivity and evenhandedness.”<sup>27</sup> So *A Generous Orthodoxy* is unfair and full of misguided caricatures. But does recognizing these “egregious errors”<sup>28</sup> make them okay?

Here’s yet one more example. McLaren admits that his unwillingness to speak candidly about his beliefs concerning the state of the wicked after death will frustrate many. “They’ll say I’m being evasive, cowardly, afraid to take a stand, and write smoke.” His response? “No one can blame them.”<sup>29</sup> So is he admitting to being evasive and cowardly?

I have never met Brian McLaren. I bet that I would really like him and find him warm and thoughtful and kindhearted. Everyone I’ve talked to who has met McLaren has spoken highly of his kindness and sincerity. I believe him when he says repeatedly that he doesn’t want to create controversy. But he is the most influential emergent writer and therefore the most controversial, no matter how many times he opines that he would rather his books be banned than stir up dissension. I hope McLaren takes seriously his own criticisms that his books are full of overgeneralizations, overreaching historical reconstructions, and just plain overreactions. Just because he beats his critics to the punch in pointing these things out does not exonerate him from the charges.

At the end of McLaren’s book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, he tries to counter objections some may have that his reading of Jesus is too new (which it is not) to be taken seriously. To counter these objections he argues that his reading of the Gospels is good because it “accounts for more of the details included in the text than a bad reading” and because “our reading here takes the whole text in all its wildness and intensity and seems to integrate political, social, theological, eschatological, and other themes into one coherent whole.”<sup>30</sup> McLaren’s stated hermeneutical approach does not bother me in the least. I use the same approach every week. What bothers me is all the other times McLaren chastises us supposed moderns for being too linear and too persuaded of our own fallible interpretations, when, at the end of the day, he reaches his conclusions like every other mortal studying the Bible. He asks, “Does this make sense with

the context? Does this fit together with other parts of Scripture? Does this piece together a myriad of readings without internal contradiction?"

We can know some things after all, then. We are not trapped in a hermeneutical spiral pulling us down into the morass of "all we have are our interpretations." There is a meaning in the text. There are bad interpretations and good interpretations. Bell may list a series of stumper questions about the Bible to convince us that "the Bible is open-ended,"<sup>31</sup> but he is certain that the first three miracles in the book of John are directly related to Dionysus, Asclepius, and Demeter, and that the reference to women being saved in childbirth is a direct reference to Artemis, and that the first chapters of Revelation follow the sequence of the Domitian games.<sup>32</sup> It appears that the dance of uncertainty is fun but hard to keep up for a whole book, let alone a lifetime.

### **THE DANGER OF AMBIGUITY: HOMOSEXUALITY AS A TEST CASE**

The mantra "God is too big to understand and the truth too mysterious to know with certainty" is not just confused humility. It has dangerous pastoral implications. Humility, as Chesterton warned, was not meant to be moved to the organ of conviction. Uncertainty in light of our human limitations is a virtue. Uncertainty in light of God's Word is not.

Take homosexuality, for example. On one level, emerging church leaders offer a wise warning: Don't demonize homosexuals, and don't speak without thinking first. McLaren writes, "I hesitate in answering 'the homosexual question' not because I'm a cowardly flip-flopper who wants to tickle ears, but because I'm a pastor, and pastors have learned from Jesus that there is more to answering a question than being right or even honest: we must also be . . . pastoral."<sup>33</sup> That makes sense to me. Like McLaren, I get people asking me where our church stands on homosexuality. When the question arises, I try to be sensitive and cautious, because I don't know where the question is coming from.

But I eventually answer the question, something McLaren does not seem

to do. McLaren's article, which has been understandably controversial, would be fine if he just said somewhere, "I believe the Bible teaches that homosexual behavior is wrong, but that's not all we have to know as pastors. We have to find the question behind the question." But he never says that. Because he doesn't know if it's wrong.

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say 'it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.' That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.<sup>34</sup>

Later, in a response article, McLaren makes clear that the "we" is intentional.<sup>35</sup> Many, but not all, of his friends in the emergent conversation are unsure what to think about homosexuality. Steve Chalke, on the other side of the Atlantic, writes, "To what extent does the church model the spiritually and socially inclusive message of Jesus? Are we liberators of excluded people or simply another dimension of their oppression? We may not exclude tax-collectors or hemorrhaging women, but what about schizophrenics, divorcees, single people, one-parent families, drug users, transsexuals or those struggling with their faith?"<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Doug Pagitt comments,

The question of humanity is inexorably linked to sexuality and gen-



der. Issues of sexuality can be among the most complex and convoluted we need to deal with. It seems to me that the theology of our history does not deal sufficiently with these issues for our day. I do not mean this as a critique, but as an acknowledgement that our times are different. I do not mean that we are a more or less sexual culture, but one that knows more about the genetic, social and cultural issues surrounding sexuality and gender than any previous culture. Christianity will be impotent to lead a conversation on sexuality and gender if we do not boldly integrate our current understandings of humanity with our theology. This will require us to not only draw new conclusions about sexuality but will force us to consider new ways of being sexual.<sup>37</sup>

New Testament scholar Ben Witherington believes Rob Bell has also been evasive (at best) when asked about homosexuality.<sup>38</sup> Witherington is largely positive toward Bell, but critical when it comes to his ethics. Without coming out and affirming homosexual behavior, Bell, speaking to a packed-out auditorium on his *Sex God* book tour, made all the usual arguments for acceptance of homosexuality. The arguments went something like this (with Witherington's response summarized in parentheses): We shouldn't speak on this issue unless we have gay friends (but didn't Paul speak to the issue?). Jesus never said anything about homosexuality (but didn't Jesus talk about God's design for marriage and celibacy for single persons?). We are hypocritical to ignore heterosexual sin (agreed, so let's stop ignoring it). The Bible says nothing about orientation (but it forbids homosexual behavior regardless).

Many emerging church leaders are loathe to even hint that homosexual behavior might be sin. Never has ambivalence sounded so courageous. But is their ambivalence really indecision? Take McLaren, for example. It seems as if he hasn't chosen sides in the debate, but for all practical purposes he has. He doesn't preach against it. He doesn't tell parishioners it's wrong. He doesn't draw any lines of right and wrong. We can all plead the humility of uncertainty,

but on some issues our silence speaks volumes. Do we really need “a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements,” so we can dialogue some more and listen to all the related academic fields before we make any decisions, which will be “admittedly provisional”?<sup>39</sup> My denomination has been talking about homosexuality for thirty years and are in an intentional three-year dialogue process presently. Tom Oden is right. “Much time has been wasted seeking traction in this swamp.” Later he notes, “Confessing Christians have a long history of experience with the frustration and futility of such undisciplined dialogue not ordered under the written Word. It less often leads to questions of truth than to the question of how we ‘feel,’ and how we can accommodate or negotiate our competing interests.”<sup>40</sup>

I believe many emergent leaders are truly torn up inside over homosexuality. They don’t want to hurt anyone. But their refusal to take a stance (and sometimes their decision to take an unbiblical stance) also hurts people—it hurts those struggling to overcome sexual temptation, it hurts those gently calling homosexuals (along with other sinners) to repentance, and it hurts those who dare to speak with certainty on this issue. After years and sometimes decades in pastoral ministry, is it too much to ask that emergent pastors have at least a working conviction on the issue? Maybe an opinion that is based on evidence, but open to reason?

When you are faced with one of the most explosive and controversial subjects facing any church and any pastor, it is good wisdom to search for questions behind the questions, but it is also prudent, helpful, and pastoral to tell your people what you actually think about the issue.

I don’t doubt that there are many people like the couple in McLaren’s article who ask about homosexuality because they have a family member who is gay and they want to know if he or she would be harshly condemned in their

**The refusal to take a stance . . . hurts people—it hurts those struggling to overcome sexual temptation and those gently calling homosexuals to repentance.**

church. But McLaren and other emerging church leaders surely must realize that indecision is not pastorally helpful to most people. There are people in my congregation who struggle with same-gender attraction. To ostracize them for struggling with these desires would be pastorally damaging, but so would an unwillingness to encourage them in their fight against these desires.

I know a man whose mother left home and went to live with her lesbian partner. He used to go to the Methodist church, but stopped going to that church and church altogether after the pastor told him to stop being so judgmental about his mother. He figured, "I don't need a church to take the side of my lesbian mother and tell me to get over it." Another couple at our church is still dealing with the hurt from a previous marriage where the former husband ran off with a priest. I recently spoke with a man in our church who wants help overcoming same-gender attraction issues.

Such stories don't tell the whole story, of course. But they do remind us of what the emerging church often forgets, that some people need to know with certainty what we think about homosexuality.

I'm not impressed with the emergent claim to be a sanctified middle ground between conservative dogmatists and liberal bad guys. The emergent tendency to wind up as the fresh and sane third option between two caricatures is unfair. I trust that McLaren and others realize that it's not just fire-breathing conservatives who know what emergent leaders should think about homosexuality. It's also Peter Akinola, primate of Nigeria, and Archbishop Livingstone Mpalanyi Nkoyoyo of Uganda who sacrificed financial aid from the West rather than be implicated in the Episcopal church's homosexual scandals, and the rest of the global South who know exactly what emerging leaders should think about homosexuality, not to mention nearly two thousand years of Christians who were also certain about God's opinion on the subject.<sup>41</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, writing in a different context, could have been speaking about the emerging church when he said, "First, these people generally object to clear-cut definitions; they dislike clarity and certainty. We need not at this point go into the

specific reason for this. I think they object to clarity of thought and definition because of its demands. The most comfortable type of religion is always a vague religion, nebulous and uncertain, cluttered up with forms and rituals.”<sup>42</sup>

To all the pastors reading this book who will encounter questions about homosexuality, please be sensitive and ask good questions, but do not be silent and do not be uncertain.

### **WHAT ABOUT DOUBT?**

The third problem with the emergent view of journey is that it establishes doubt as the essence of faith. McLaren is more balanced than most in admitting that doubt is not always good.<sup>43</sup> But then he turns around and lauds the value of doubt. “It’s ironic: the more free I am to doubt a specific belief, the more free I become to hold on to that person-to-Person faith in God. . . . After all, to trust our beliefs about God more than we trust God—wouldn’t that be missing the point?”<sup>44</sup> Or as Peter Rollins puts it, “In contrast to the modern view that religious doubt is something to reject, fear or merely tolerate, doubt not only can be seen as an inevitable aspect of our humanity but also can be celebrated as a vital part of faith.”<sup>45</sup>

Tomlinson makes the same point: “Post-evangelicals also want room to express doubt without having someone rush around in a mad panic trying to ‘deliver’ them from unbelief. Far too often doubt is portrayed simply as an enemy rather than a potential friend; as something mature Christians should not suffer from, rather than a vital means by which Christians mature.”<sup>46</sup>

Doubt, for Tomlinson, is the opposite of the “neat schemes in which we think we have truth wrapped up. Doubt creates a ‘holy insecurity.’”<sup>47</sup> For emergent leaders, faith is a personal trust commitment despite the uncertainty of our knowledge and the doubt we all experience. In other words, doubt is the good friend of faith.

The key to the emergent appreciation for doubt is the distinction made between trusting in God versus trusting in doctrines about God. Doubt is good

because it turns our attention from our fallible, man-made beliefs about God, which we can't trust, to a personal God whom we can trust. Instead of relying on religion, Christ bids us to trust Him.<sup>48</sup>

But isn't this a distinction without a difference? If I trust Frank, or to use religious language, have faith in Frank, what does that mean? How would I explain my faith in Frank to a friend who doesn't have faith? I would explain

that I believe Frank will keep his promises. I know that he is a trustworthy person. I have faith in his ability to do what he says. I might even point to instances in the past where he proved faithful. In explaining my trust in Frank in these ways, have I not also explained my faith in certain beliefs about Frank? I believe he is trustwor-

thy. I believe he has acted in certain ways in the past. I believe he is capable of doing what he promises. Can my trust in Frank really be distinguished from the confidence I have in my beliefs about him? If I doubt all that I believe to be true about Frank, how does that make me more able to trust Frank the person?

Don't misunderstand; doubt is not the unforgivable sin. All the great books on spiritual warfare (or spiritual direction or spiritual formation, as they might be called today) understand that Christians, very often tremendous Christians, go through seasons of doubt. They question their faith. They don't sense God's presence. They doubt their salvation. Most of us will feel these things at some point in our lives, which is why Jude says, "Have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22).

But if we are to show mercy to those who doubt, doesn't this suggest that doubt is something we are supposed to work through and fight against rather than embrace as the great friend of faith? Faith is, after all, being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrew 11:1). True faith, to quote the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/A 21), "is not only a knowledge and conviction"; it is also a "deep-rooted assurance." To be sure, Jesus had mercy on

**Doubt is something we are supposed to work through . . . rather than embrace as the great friend of faith.**

those who struggled. Sometimes the only prayer we can muster is “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). But Jesus also rebuked those who doubted and chided His disciples for having little faith (Matt. 6:30; 21:21; John 20:27; cf. James 1:6).

Tomlinson would have us break free from our “rigid frameworks of certainty” and “climb out of the little boat of our settled certainties and join Jesus in walking on the waters of uncertainty and vulnerability.”<sup>49</sup> But let’s look at that story for a moment. Peter took a risk when he came to Jesus on the water. Way to go, Peter. That took faith—we have all heard sermons how you can’t walk on water until you get out of the boat. But Peter saw the wind and was afraid. He doubted. And what was Jesus’ response? “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31). Doubt was not the friend of Peter’s faith but its enemy. Jesus did not applaud Peter for his struggle to believe, but rebuked him for his doubt and lack of faith, for his uncertainty.

Perhaps in some churches, people need room to question without fear of disapproval. Perhaps some Christians need permission to think again. But being tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine is not the goal. Perhaps some of us on the journey need to be reminded of the destination, that we are moving toward a place where the faith will become sight.

And until we reach that destination, let us rest confidently in the certain truth that God is knowable and can make Himself and His ways known. Maybe Lloyd-Jones—in his typical Welsh, Calvinist, authoritarian, overstated way—was on to something. “Come to the Word of God,” he says. “Stop asking questions. Start with the promises in their right order. Say: ‘I want the truth whatever it costs me.’ Bind yourself to it, submit yourself to it, come in utter submission as a little child and plead with Him to give you a clear sign, perfect vision, and to make you whole. . . . We are not meant to be left in a state of doubt and misgiving, of uncertainty and unhappiness.”<sup>50</sup>

## Notes

1. Spencer Burke with Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 45.
2. Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 138.
3. Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete, 2006), 6.
4. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 27.
5. David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 122 (emphasis original).
6. Doug Pagitt and the Solomon's Porch Community, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 23–24.
7. Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 43.
8. Quoted in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, Leonard Sweet, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 249.
9. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Nelson, 2003), 103.
10. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).
11. Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 113–14.
12. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 23.
13. Doug Pagitt, as quoted in Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 85.
14. Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 57.
15. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 32–33 (emphasis in original).
16. See D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 188ff., where he lists page after page of biblical passages where we are said to *know* things with certainty.
17. Doug Pagitt remarks, “To be honest, I am not sure how useful this sense of mystery is. I am not saying Dan [Kimball] is dishonest, not at all. I am suggesting that at times, there is a bit of word play going on that allows Dan to simultaneously believe (with full assurance of authority) but not have to be responsible for that belief”; in Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 112–13.
18. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1925), 231.
19. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 18–19.
20. McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 84.
21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), III.ii.39.
22. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 27–28.
23. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 30.
24. Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 119.
25. Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 7.
26. [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o\\_3.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o_3.html)
27. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 38.
28. *Ibid.*, 43.
29. *Ibid.*, 42.
30. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 210–11.
31. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 46.

32. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
33. “Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question,” January 23, 2006; in “Out of Ur,” a *Leadership Journal* blog, at [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html)
34. *Ibid.*
35. “Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question 4: McLaren’s Response,” January 30, 2006, in “Out of Ur,” a *Leadership Journal* blog, at [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_3.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_3.html)
36. Chalke and Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 94.
37. Webber, *Listening to the Beliefs*, 140.
38. “Rob Bell Hits Lexington and a Packed-Out House,” February 15, 2007, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>
39. [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html)
40. Thomas C. Oden, *Turning Around the Mainline* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 64, 67.
41. It’s no secret that the global South, especially African leaders in the Anglican church, have responded in dismay over the confirmation of Gene Robinson by the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA is the Anglican branch in America) as the first actively gay bishop. For example, Akinola concluded his statement: “A clear choice has been made for a church that exists primarily in allegiance to the unbiblical departures and waywardness of our generation; a Church that enthrones the will of men over and above the authority of God and His revealed and written Word. Such a church is bound to become a shrine for the worship of men rather than God” (<http://www.ekk.org/articles.php?id=12&page=8>). Nkoyoyo’s words were even stronger. When the ECUSA wanted to send a delegation to Uganda in order to offer financial assistance to the people, the Archbishop explained why he could not accept such a delegation. “If we fall silent about what you have done—promoting unbiblical sexual immorality—and we overturn or ignore the decision to declare a severing of relationship with ECUSA, poor displaced persons will receive aid. Here is our response: The gospel of Jesus Christ is not for sale, even among the poorest of us who have no money. Eternal life, obedience to Jesus Christ, and conforming to his Word are more important. The Word of God is clear that you have chosen a course of separation that leads to spiritual destruction. Because we love you, we cannot let that go unanswered. . . . As a result, any delegation you send cannot be welcomed, received, or seated. Neither can we share fellowship nor even receive desperately needed resources. If, however, you repent and return to the Lord, it would be an occasion of great joy.”
42. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 44.
43. McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 243ff.
44. *Ibid.*, 251.
45. Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 33.
46. Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 25–26.
47. *Ibid.*, 103.
48. Dwight J. Friesen in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 211.
49. Tomlinson in *An Emergent Manifesto*, Pagitt and Jones, eds., 88.
50. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 48.