

## What Church Is Emerging?

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What is the emergent church about? A great place to start is in the writings of Brian McLaren, a key figure in this movement. For Mr. McLaren, an important doctrinal distinctive of the emergent church is found in its critique of the "exclusivity of Christ." He has written an article entitled *A Reading of John 14:6* which was considered for inclusion in his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, and which provides his closely reasoned treatment of John 14:6. (This is the passage where Jesus declares, "No one comes to the Father, but through Me.")

How one understands John 14:6 has a profound bearing on one's view of the "exclusivity of Christ." By writing this article, McLaren has given us the benefit of a lucid and developed treatment of how he believes this passage should be understood. Respecting his work enough to thoroughly evaluate it seems a good way to follow in the footsteps of the Bereans who were "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

What does it mean to be an "evangelical Christian?" Here's my basic two-part definition: An evangelical Christian (1) believes that salvation from sin is only found in a personal relationship with Jesus as his Savior and (2) is committed to making this good news known **to all men**. If Brian McLaren's analysis of John 14:6 is sound, then a key passage that has been much used to support the evangelical position has been taken from the table. This is not small potatoes!

### Several Points of Agreement

Let me start by noting several points I agree with. First, the editor (Tony Jones) suggests that this article be used to "thoughtfully and deeply engage the biblical content" (p. 1). I couldn't agree more. Look at the reviews of Mr. McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* on Amazon.com. There are plenty and they fall into two extremes. Strident rejections, on the one hand, and ringing endorsements, on the other - not much biblical interaction. So, I have picked an article that is a close reasoning of a biblical passage, a passage that concerns an important evangelical distinctive, and plan to take up the challenge to "engage the biblical content." Right on, Tony!

On pages 2-3 of his article, Mr. McLaren talks about "a kind of multiple choice examination" in which one agrees or disagrees with the idea titled the "exclusivity of Christ." Although McLaren doesn't return to this topic at the end of his article, he seems to be saying (by its end) that there is a third choice, "you don't need to know the answer to this question." Balance demands that we acknowledge that there are times when Jesus proposes just such a third choice. For example, in Acts 1:6, the disciples ask a question which solicits a yes-or-no response. Jesus' answer in Acts 1:7 is a "that-is-not-a-question-for-which-you-need-an-answer" kind of response. So, I agree that it's within the realm of possibility for Jesus to be doing something similar in John 14:6.

On pages 11 and 15, McLaren rightly emphasizes the compassionate nature of Jesus' ministry. His mission, by His own account, was to "seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). But note that those whom Jesus seeks are "lost." "Lost" sounds like a problem. And sometimes, people feel condemned when they are told they have a problem. So, I agree that reaching out to tax-gatherers and prostitutes conforms to Jesus' mission and is His invitation for us

to minister without prejudice. This does not seem to eliminate the possibility of rejection or condemnation to be felt by those who are unwilling or unable to admit that they are "lost."

I can definitely agree with Mr. McLaren (page 13) that we must honestly admit we don't have all the answers. However, admitting I don't have all the answers doesn't mean I don't have answers, answers to the really important questions. The author specifically identifies **this** question as one without answers: "Who is in and who is out." And I agree that this is not **MY** question to answer. It is the Lord's: "the Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim. 2:19). This doesn't mean that the question of "who is in and who is out" is irrelevant to me, however. Assurance of my salvation and that of others is worth pursuing, even though, I must agree, in the final analysis, Jesus is the One who will decide who is in and who is out.

### Some "Qualified" Points of Agreement

I agree with Mr. McLaren that a consideration of context is critical to the process of biblical interpretation (pp. 3-4). But I think this appreciation for context must have more nuance to it by recognizing the interplay between authorial intent and context. In John 20:30-31, John expressly declares his intentions: "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." John is doing more than simply recounting a series of events. He has selected material which can be used for maximum effect in order that those reading his account may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

I agree that it is valuable to ask, what did Jesus' words mean to the disciples? I would add that it is also valuable and necessary to ask, what did John intend his readers (us included) to understand from his account? Remember that John is writing as an elder statesman of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church, one in a great position to help men understand things taught by Jesus but not originally grasped by his disciples, himself included! We ought to be open to the possibility that Jesus' answer is bigger, more far-reaching, than the question which prompted it. The author of the Gospel of John tells us that this is precisely his purpose.

On page 10, McLaren summarizes John 14:6: "Guys, its not about knowing information, techniques, directions, and or instructions: its about knowing me, trusting me!" I agree unequivocally about the centrality of knowing Jesus! It does not matter what a man knows - if he doesn't know Jesus, he doesn't know what matters! That being said, pages 9-10 could easily be construed by some (McLaren, too?) to suggest that knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus oppose each other. How is it possible to know Jesus without knowing some information about Jesus? In John 20:30-31, John expressly identifies some information about Jesus that must be believed, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. So, I think it more balanced to say that knowing Jesus is like a lens that does not oppose information, techniques, directions, and instructions, but which makes all of them come into their proper focus with Him in the center.

## A Hermeneutical Evaluation

Okay, let's get to the heart of the matter. Is Brian McLaren's Exposition of John 14:6 sound? There is one interpretive issue and one theological issue that require comment.

**An Interpretive Issue** First, McLaren proposes that when Jesus says "no one comes to the Father, but through Me," the "no one" to which Jesus refers are the eleven disciples reclining at table with Him (pp. 9-10). He believes that this is the meaning which best fits the context. There are two problems with this view: (1) Jesus did not use a second person construction in 14:6. He says "no one comes" not "none of you come." The fact that He does not use "you" in John 14:6 tells us that He is making a statement that is applicable to a broader audience. It is relevant to the eleven, but also to a larger circle of which they are but a part.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Jesus himself identifies this larger circle. In the prayer found in John 17 (which is part of a single literary and narrative unit that spans chapters 13-17), Jesus indicates that His thoughts on this evening have not only been on the eleven but "those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20). It seems clear to me that when Jesus says "no one comes to the Father, but through Me," He is making a general statement. The breadth of its applicability perfectly fits with Jesus' concern for all believers expressed later on this very night.

Does this conclusion run rough-shod over McLaren's contextual considerations? I don't think so. McLaren is using "context" to limit the applicability of Jesus' statement to only those physically present at the time it was uttered. I would simply note that (1) Jesus sometimes answers a question by citing a principle that has relevance to more than the specific occasion or audience that raised the question. Sometimes the answer Jesus gives is bigger than the question. (2) Further, John, the writer of this gospel, informs us that he is intentionally selecting narrative material that pertains to believers in general.

Simply put, "no one" in John 14:6 means no one! Here's an example. If a child says to his assembled playmates, "no one may come into my tree-house," his meaning is clear. Yes, he is speaking to his immediate audience, but he is not limiting his exclusion to only those present. He wants no one, including but not limited to present company, to stay out of his tree-house.

**A Theological Issue** Now let's consider the second issue, the theological one. McLaren suggests that the traditional view of John 14:6 is at odds with 14:9 which he considers the "dynamic core" of this passage. He says of verse 9: "Here the irony becomes nearly unbearable (to me), as we contrast this statement with the conventional interpretation of verse 6" (p. 11). He is saying that

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<sup>1</sup>Here's an optional note for those with an interest in the original language: In Greek, a verb is inflected according to person and number and a subject pronoun is thereby embedded in the verb. The addition of a subject noun or pronoun, especially in an initial position, identifies and/or emphasizes the subject. If Jesus intended to refer to the disciples, He would do so using a verb form that is inflected with a second person ending and, for emphasis, would place a second person pronoun in an emphatic initial position - See the very next verse where the verb form has been inflected to the second person because Jesus is making a statement that is relevant to the eleven.

14:6 cannot possibly be about "exclusion" when 14:9 is such a clear declaration of a "theology of inclusion." (This term is not his, but I think it captures the idea.) So this objection to the traditional view of John 14:6 is more theological - it is based upon a doctrine which McLaren finds outside of 14:6 which limits how it should be understood. In all fairness, "Scripture interprets Scripture" is a recognized principle of biblical interpretation. Is it applicable here?

McLaren believes that "Jesus way has been compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, and love from beginning to end" (p. 11). I do not disagree that Jesus' earthly ministry was the perfect personification of love. But for McLaren, a "theology of inclusion" and the "exclusivity of Christ" are mutually exclusive. They are like two roads headed in opposite directions.

Scripture, however, finds no contradiction between the fact of Jesus' proactive love and His exclusivity as mediator. Note the interplay and complementarity of these two themes in 1 Tim. 2:4-5: "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Theme One: God earnestly seeks the salvation of all men. Theme Two: Jesus alone is the mediator who can reconcile all men to God.

So, this looks like a case where McLaren is seeing a conflict that Scripture does not! Indeed, a passage like 1 Tim. 2:4-5 provides a reasonable explanation for the ardency of Jesus' unprejudiced pursuit of all men. He is the sole and sufficient solution to their greatest problem! I remain convinced that John 14:6 is a simple and clear declaration of the need for all men to come to Jesus as their Savior.

## What We Need to Hear

Pascal once said, "Every man is almost always led to believe not through proof, but through that which is attractive." There is disagreement about whether this is as it should be - Pascal himself considered beauty a "base" path to belief. But I think his statement captures the dynamic behind the emergent church movement. The evangelical church has been accused, and I think to some extent justly, of championing confessional purity while neglecting genuine heart/life change. The emergent church seems a reaction to those who are perceived as saying they have all the answers but whose unchanged lives betray their words. I do not disagree with this critique.

The **solution** to this condition is something about which we disagree. For the emergent church, the solution is found in swinging the pendulum from truth to heart/life. For me, the solution lies in recognizing the importance and inextricability of both. We may not have all the answers, but we do have answers, answers to the most important of questions. We must boldly and clearly proclaim those answers. But, the authenticity of our message is damaged when the lives of its champions are singularly unattractive. When the truth is delivered with pride and arrogance; when the lives of those extolling its virtues are plain and unbecoming; in short, where the beauty of the truth cannot be seen, we have become a liability to another's belief. The truth still must be believed, but now it must be believed in spite of us, rather than because of us.

I witness in the emergent church a shot across the bow, a warning: Unless we show the beauty of the truth - the freedom, joy, and grace of the transformed life made possible by Jesus and Jesus alone - then we will eventually have nothing to say. We will reside in a great Christian rest home, mumbling to ourselves what outsiders view as inane prattle. We may have something worth hearing, but we will not have earned the right to be heard.

So here's my bottom line! I am propelled all the more to learn from God's Word in my heart and in my mind! I want Proverbs 22:17-21 to define my approach to the Bible.

“Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge; For it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, that they may be ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the Lord, I have taught you today, even you. Have I not written to you excellent things of counsels and knowledge, to make you know the certainty of the words of truth that you may correctly answer to him who sent you?”

I want my behavior to commend to all men the Jesus for whom I live. I want that life in Jesus to be informed by principles from God's Word which have become my own heartbeat, the fuel for bold and winsome faith, and the words by which to impart life to others.