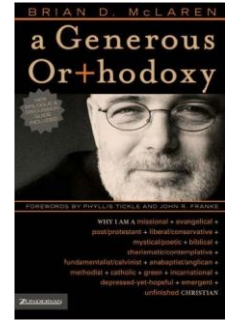


Brian McLaren

A Generous Orthodoxy



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Why I am a missional evangelical post/protestant liberal/conservative mystical/poetic biblical charismatic/contemplative fundamentalist/calvinist anabaptist/anglican methodist catholic green incarnational depressed-yet-hopeful emergent unfinished CHRISTIAN.

He also describes himself (p127) as a middle-aged, bald introvert with a small Buddha belly and without proper credentials...

What's orthodoxy? Right thinking/opinions? Core essentials we all agree with? Historical accumulation of precedents to believe in? Trouble with that is it gets harder year by year to be a Christian than it was in Jesus' day – all you needed then was a right attitude towards Jesus. 'If Christian orthodoxy is defined as the hard mental work of holding in one's mind an increasing bank of complex opinions about a lot of things before breakfast.. hasn't something important been lost? Orthodoxy should be identified with a consistent practice of humility charity, courage, diligence – though usually we assume 'that orthodoxy (right thinking about the gospel) and orthopraxy (right practice of the gospel) can be separated – so that one could at least be proud of getting an A in orthodoxy even when one earned a D in orthopraxy, which is only an elective class anyway'... So he sees orthodoxy *as a kind of internalized belief, tacit and personal, that becomes part of you to such a degree that once assimilated, you hardly need to think of it.*

I: Why I am a Christian

1. The Seven Jesuses I have known

A picturebook Jesus. A Jesus born to die (the conservative protestant Jesus), who dealt mostly in salvation and guilt removal. A Pentecostal/charismatic Jesus, active not just in the past but in the present and focussed on the Holy Spirit. A Roman Catholic Jesus, resurrected in victory, encountering his followers in worship. An E Orthodox Jesus, an incarnate Jesus, entering into creation and drawing us into God. A Liberal Protestant Jesus, whose teachings offered the model for a way of life that brings blessing to the world. An Anabaptist Jesus, who shows us how to live our daily lives. The Jesus of the Oppressed, offering nonviolent liberation to the poor. See summary on p72. Now, many years later, he's beginning to arrive at a view of Jesus that approaches the simple, integrated richness he knew as a little boy – a new simplicity on the far side of complexity. *Why not celebrate them all?*

The early church leaders described the Trinity as *perichoresis* – circle+dance. The Trinity is an eternal dance of Father, Son and Spirit sharing mutual love, honour, happiness, joy [cp Par XII-XIII].

2. Jesus and God B.

I am a Christian because I have confidence in Jesus Christ. God A stands for dominance, control, submission; God B stands for interdependence, relationship, possibility. Christians live in universe B - in dangerous wonder, the starting point for a generous orthodoxy.

3. Would Jesus be a Christian?

The more he reads the NT the more he thinks most of Christianity as practised today has little to do with Jesus; he'd not be caught dead as a Christian were he here today. *Has he become less our Lord and more our*

Mascot? 'Jesus is Lord' means Jesus liberates us from determinism, deconstructs oppressive authority and the self-interest of leaders/nations, destabilises the status quo, delivers us from corrupt power. Do we use the cross to dominate, or to liberate? If the real Lord Jesus knocked on our door as the revolutionary king/master/teacher, we'd keep him out – the Buddy Jesus is already sitting on the couch watching TV with us...

4. Jesus: Saviour or what?

We've also misconstrued the meaning of words like saviour, save, salvation. In general, in any context, 'save' means 'get out of trouble'. God saves in 3 ways:

- By judging, ie bringing the natural consequence of bad actions on people – cp Ps 98
- By forgiving, because our evil is often self created, and only when named can it be forgiven
- By teaching or revealing; showing us how to do things a different way

This is a window into the meaning of the cross. He does this for us individually, but also collectively – for too many Christians, salvation has become another personal consumer product (my personal Saviour, my personal computer) and Christianity its marketing programme. It arose when people had grown used to seeing themselves as Christians because the West was Christian – ie without personal commitment. But the 'personal Saviour' solution has created more problems.

II: The Kind of Christian I am

5. Why I am missional

Term missional arose in 1990s, in gospel/culture network. Bosch, Newbigin, Donovan – rather than seeing missiology as a study within theology, we should see theology as a discipline within Christian mission. Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, its meaning. Our mission is this: *to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world*. We are not end users of the gospel. It's not 'all about me', and church is not about meeting my needs. The emphasis goes me→church→world, in expanding circles. Ours is an inclusive faith, spreading outwards, not defining who's in and who's out.

'In a pluralistic world, a religion is valued based on the benefits it brings to its nonadherents'. Our calling is that we are blessed in this life to be a blessing to everyone on earth.

6. Why I am evangelical

Big E evangelical often means the Religious Right. Or fundamentalists of a slightly less narrow-minded and arrogant attitude. Evangelical refers to people who highly respect the bible, emphasize personal conversion, believe God can be known personally, want to share their faith with others. It's about being passionate. But evangelicals have painted themselves into lots of corners; hence the term post-evangelical.. 'Evangelical' needs to become an inclusive and positive term, not a sectarian/restrictive one.

7. Why I am post/protestant

The word Protestant has 2 meanings – protest (about the means of salvation) and telling our story. 'Protestants have paid more attention to the Bible than any other group, but sadly, much of their Bible study was undertaken to fuel their efforts to prove themselves right and others wrong'. Most Catholics today are very clear about grace being a free gift; our outrage at their past failures compares unfavourably with their present humility... Could we switch the Protestant focus from protesting what we're against to testifying, telling our story about what we're for. Perhaps to do this would be to become post-protestant.

8. Why I am liberal/conservative

How do we know things? It used to be, through the authorities. But sometimes they turned out to be wrong – as Copernicus, Galileo, Luther, Calvin thought. The alternative answer was proposed: think for yourself. Luther's 'Here I stand' statement was perhaps the first statement uttered in the modern world. But then you get the problem – how do I

interpret the Bible, if not by authority? Conservative Protestants claimed it carried its own authority and is without error. LIBERAL Protestants said that substituted a paper Pope for a real one, and plumped for free enquiry. Both were ways of surviving in the struggle with modernity. Strengths- liberals have pioneered in science/ethics, conservatives in personal conversion and discipleship.

9. Why I am mystical/poetic

Brueggemann talks about the gospel being a truth reduced, and the need for us to be poets speaking against a prose world. Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: *'God needs prophets in order to make himself known, and all prophets are necessarily artistic. What a prophet has to say can never be said in prose'*. Quotes Pascal's 'Fire' memo – the night the mathematician became a mystic... GK Chesterton: *'Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason.. Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion.. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head'*,165. 'Modern Christians do not build cathedrals of stone and glass as in the Middle Ages, but rather conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument' – known as systematic theologies. Bath said they would disappear as suddenly as they had arisen. 'At the heart of the theological project in the late modern world was the assumption that one could and should reduce all revealed truth into propositions and organize those propositions into an outline that exhaustively contains and serves as the best vehicle for truth.. But.. prose abstractions just don't contain or convey God's truth as well as we thought they did. This is obviously true of our theological jargon – words like *omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, impassible*, and so on.' 169. Romano Guardini: when one *'attempts to convey something of God's holy otherness he tries one earthly simile after another. In the end he discards them all as inadequate and says apparently wild and senseless things meant to startle the heart into feeling what lies beyond the reaches of the brain'* – eg 1 Cor 2.9, 'eye has not seen', etc. *Flung into a world of new logic, we are forced to make a genuine effort to understand'*.170. 'A generous orthodoxy doesn't take itself too seriously. It is humble; it doesn't claim too much; it admits it walks with a limp.' It remembers that the Bible contains very little expository prose. We need a balance – a Catholic bishop once said Christianity has 2 lungs – a Western, rational one, and an Eastern, mystical one. We need to breathe with both. McLaren sees God's guidance in his nontheological education he read English. 'My graduate training was in literature and language, which sensitized me to drama and conflict, to syntax and semantics and semiotics, to text and context, to prose and to poetry... it helped me to see how carefully chosen and clear, daring words can point to mysteries and wonders beyond words.' As we learn a generous orthodoxy, we become more and more prepared to see the mystery and poetry everywhere, to hear it, to feel it, and to sing.

10. Why I am biblical

Brilliant on not having a reductionist concept of the Word. Just as I am a complex synergy of biology and community and history, so scripture is at once God's creation and the creation of the dozens of people and communities and cultures who produced it. The 'Word of God' is never used in the Bible to refer to the bible... McLaren also uses the image of bicycle riding to illustrate how we live by scripture. Just as it's impossible to balance a bicycle when it's not moving, so we are most likely to crash in our dealing with scripture if we aren't moving forwards in our mission. Paul says it's useful for equipping, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Scripture doesn't ever talk about itself in words such as authority, inerrancy, infallibility, objective, absolute, literal – these are modernist words. We need to reclaim the Bible as narrative.

How do we make sense of the non-pc bits of the OT? What if God couldn't have bot from A to D without working patiently with people through B and C? We should not treat uncomfortable bits of scripture as if they were intended as an expression of God's desire for people for all time. The people of God are on what Stanley Grenz calls a narrative trajectory – learning. [nb see what Jesus says about divorce and why Moses permitted it!, MT 19 – and also sermon on mount interpreting commandments].

11. Why I am charismatic/contemplative

His charismatic friends gave him his high school diploma in the ways of the Spirit; Catholic contemplatives gave him a degree in the liberal arts of the Spirit. Many charismatics believe the Spirit of Jesus can be experienced one step beyond the normal – ie Jesus is always present, but we need to take a step of faith to experience him. Danger – a treadmill where you have to work ever harder to work up an experience of the Spirit – specially for leaders; it's a cruel assignment to be expected to deliver high-voltage Spirit experiences on a weekly basis to charismatic consumers... this is what was said by

Ignatius of Loyola's disciples: *we often saw how even the smallest things could make his spirit soar upwards to God, who even in the smallest things is the Greatest. At the sight of a little plant, a leaf, a flower or a fruit, an insignificant worm or a tiny animal, Ignatius could soar free above the heaven and reach through into things which lie beyond the senses*'. Contemplation is simply seeing things in new light, that's all. 'I feel (not every single moment, but often) that I am carrying around this hilarious secret: that I actually own all things, that all things are mine – because I am Christ's, and Christ is God's, and God allows me to have things in the way that matters most. Not by having them in my legal possession (which has many downsides, including upkeep and taxes!), but by having them in my spiritual possession by gratefully seeing them, gratefully knowing and cherishing them'. Those weren't legally *my* goldfinches or *my* sycamore trees or *my* rocky-bottomed streams in the park that day, but did anyone on earth possess them as fully as I did that day?'

12. Why I am fundamentally Calvinist

As Protestants fragmented, someone suggested affirming the fundamentals of the faith which held them together. Perhaps really there are just two – to love God and to love our neighbours? Jesus has taught us that the way to know what God is like is not by determining our philosophical boundary conditions before departing, but by embarking on an adventure of faith, hope and love, even if you don't know where your path will lead. The fundamentals are things of love, not of doctrine. This is a generous fundamentalism. At the same time, reformed Christianity is the highest expression of modern Christianity – but, but, if we are moving beyond modernity, then the forms of Christianity that have most successfully adapted to it are in the most trouble – Reformed Christianity is in for a major identity crisis. If it succeeds in again seeking to construct formulations of faith that are as fitting to postmodern times as theirs were to their post-medieval times, something great will have happened.

The 5 fundamentals chosen (along the battle lines with liberals) were: virgin birth, the inerrance of scripture, penal substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the imminent return of Jesus. Only 2 of these are rooted in the creeds; so these were fundamentals not for the practice of the faith, but for resisting liberals.

13. Why I am (Ana)baptist/Anglican

Term anabaptist describes the more radical members of the Reformation who were persecuted by the Lutherans and the Reformed. Most English speaking Baptists see themselves as part of the Anabaptist movement. He's not bothered about when/how you were baptised – but he is interested in what prompted the move from adult to infant baptism: an emphasis on personal commitment, seeing the Christian faith as a way of life, taking a radical posture in relation to modernity (eg the Amish), living and working in the margins, making Jesus central, practising peace, practising community in creation. When, like the Anglican church, you choose both Catholic and Protestant you learn to live with tension, to live in community, keeping scripture, reason, tradition and experience in dynamic tension. Anglicans are kept together by their appreciation of beauty in liturgy. Both Anabaptists and Anglicans withheld their full allegiance from modernity; and so have much to offer those who seek a generous orthodoxy beyond modernity.

14. Why I am Methodist

Effects amongst ordinary people of Wesley's preaching was extraordinary. Luther and Calvin had created Protestant intellectual systems; but nobody created a new system of spiritual formation and nurture to replace the Catholic system of spirituality that had developed during the Middle Ages – until the Wesleys. People had Protestant doctrine, but not the tracks, patterns or methods of spiritual formation necessary to make it live. Today we are in a parallel situation. By the 70s a system to replace the lost Wesleyan one had been reformed from the Methodist heritage, by orgs such as the Navigators, Campus Crusade, IVF – an informal one involving 'quiet times', group study, fill-in-the-blank discipleship guides, etc. By the 90s people began to feel these weren't working; the underlying goal was to inculcate a basic systematic theology predicated on the assumption that right thinking → right behaviour, and more Bible → better Christians, and that knowledge → power. People like Dallas Willard, Larry Crabb, Richard Foster et al noted that systematic theologies or biblical knowledge did not produce personal transformation. Many were led back into Catholic contemplative practices and medieval monastic disciplines. What comes out will emphasize small groups of spiritual friends, and will empower lay people.

15. Why I am Catholic

Speaking the creed. The word 'apostolic' actually means 'missional' – the apostles were those called together so they could be sent out on a mission – the Greek root for apostle and the Latin root for mission both mean sent out. Christianity is a missional faith. Catholicism is sacramental: a sacrament is an object or practice that mediates the divine to humans. It carries something of God to us; it is a means of grace, and conveys sacredness.

- Strength of a sacramental faith – through learning that a few things can carry the sacred, we become open to the fact that all things (good, created things) can carry the sacred – the smile of a child, the bounce of a puppy, the arch of a dancer's back, good coffee, friends, conversation. Start with 3, or 7, sacraments and soon everything becomes potentially sacramental.
- Liturgical – all denominations are, some just don't write it down
- Respects tradition – which is 'democracy extended through time', trusting to a consensus of human voices
- Celebrating Mary – a female focus, compared with the exclusively male Protestant one
- Knowing how to party – because focussed on the incarnation of Jesus

16. Why I am Green

Christians are getting increasingly involved in protecting creation. 'Too often we put the gospel of Jesus through the strainer of consumerist capitalism and retain only the thin broth that this modern-day Caesar lets pass through'. For much of W Christianity the doctrine of creation (a biblical term) has been eaten alive by the doctrine of the fall (not a biblical term). In many circles the term creation only comes up with 'versus evolution'! Go and look at turtles... Chesterton – 'the main point of Christianity was this: that Nature is not our mother: Nature is our sister', 267.

Increased concern for the poor/oppressed leads to increased concern for all creation. Focussing on creation helps us understand ownership, keeps our eyes on the global as well as the local, and ultimately will make us change our systems to ones that don't lionise resources, damage others and trash the planet.

17. Why I am Incarnational

Most religious broadcasts do fundraising through fear – give money to avoid this or that outcome. But Christians who listen to fear broadcasts become afraid. 'Jesus created not an in-group but a come-on-in group. Jesus threatened people with inclusion; if they were to be excluded, it would be because they refused to accept their acceptance.' 279. Preaching love creates division/hate – eg telling your white racist parents you think we should love African Americans and Hispanics. Telling your company you want to reduce the profit margin by recycling; telling your political party you want to treat your opponents as you would like them to treat you – not by creating fear of them or insulting them. A generous incarnational orthodoxy doesn't mean pretending all religions are the same/equal, or replacing their culture with a Euro-American one. It means learning from the good in others, and sharing the good in my own faith. It means dialogue, humility etc. Bosch: 'we cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God'.

18. Why I am depressed-yet-hopeful

Jesus didn't come to start another religion. A generous orthodoxy will look back on our first 2000 years of Christian history and face our failures, our atrocities, our abdications, our cowardice, our complicity, our betrayal of Jesus, and say to ourselves, 'Never forget'.

19. Why I am emergent

Term 'emergent' coined in 2001 by their Young Leader Networks. 'Emergents' turns out to be the name for small saplings growing up under a mature forest canopy – which seems appropriate. Whatever we emerge from, to be generous means we cannot despise our roots or reject our past. We won't be better than our forebears, just different, as we journey on towards our final home in God.

Pluralistic relativism 'claimed that all truth is culturally situated (except its own truth, which is true for all cultures); it claimed there are no transcendental truths (except its own pronouncements, which transcend specific contents); it claimed that all hierarchies or value rankings are oppressive and marginalizing (except its own value ranking, which is superior to the alternatives); it claimed there are no universal truths (except its own pluralism, which is universally true for all peoples)'

– Ken Wilber, 324. This is not emergence. Nor is the opposite, which is to hold to systematic theologies which claim to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever. To be emergent is to look for a way of seeing/being that is beyond both modern exclusivism/absolutism and beyond pluralistic relativism.

20. Why I am Unfinished

A generous orthodoxy will pursue a more narrative approach to theology, rather than trying to capture timeless truths in objective statements systematized in analytical outlines. It embraces, preserves, and reflects on the stories of people and communities involved in the romance of God – always beginning with and returning to the treasury of stories in scripture. Sitting at the airport, looking at those who are currently his neighbours, watching a scene radiant with the glory of God, being transformed from the I who he has been, creating the I who he is becoming.

'To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving .. community of people who are seeking the truth.. on the road of mission.. and who have been launched on the quest by Jesus, who, with us, guides us still. Do we have it? Have we taken hold of it? Not fully, not yet, of course not. But we keep seeking. We're finding enough to keep us going. But we're not finished.' 333.

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