

The Gifts of the Spirit: Spirituality or Vocation?

Not too long ago it was common that any theologian who wrote on the Holy Spirit would begin with a lament something to the effect that the Spirit had not been given His due at least in western theology. Then came the Charismatic Movement and in its wake a whole host of theologies of the Spirit. Recent works such as those of Alasdair Hedron, Michael Welker, and Veli-Matti Kaerkkainen¹ provide menus for the smorgasbord. Concurrent with renewed interest in the Spirit is a fascination with spirituality. The term itself covers a broad range of themes both Christian and non-Christian, both religious and secular. Indeed “spirituality” is in these days and the forms that it takes are nigh unto countless as a “Google search” will indicate. Spirituality comes in all flavors with and without the Holy Spirit².

The topic assigned me for this paper, “The Holy Spirit and His Gifts” at first invited some reflection on the gifts of the Spirit, perhaps a look at contentious issues that remain from the shrinking Charismatic Movement, but now that Renewal in Missouri has given up the ghost, I’m not sure how relevant such an undertaking would be for attendees at this Symposium. If speaking in tongues and healings are not in vogue, then what about those spiritual gift inventories and assessment tools? Well, that ground has been well covered at past symposia by Robert Schaibley and Norman Nagel. Their papers are available in *Lutheran Quarterly*³ and the *Concordia Journal*⁴. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations document on the topic is now a dozen years old. While such spiritual gifts inventories are still being used, I am not sure there is much more to be said on the subject. We are still left with the topic, “The Holy Spirit and His Gifts.” I am going to take some liberty with that topic, focusing on spirituality, probing the question of whether the work and gifts of the Spirit have to do with spirituality or vocation.

We first turn to spirituality. Now that is a huge topic so I am going to limit myself to one particular manifestation of spirituality because it seems to encompass and embody a number of trends that Lutheran pastors might find challenging today or conversely might be tempted to embrace. This particular example of contemporary spirituality is the Emergent Church Movement. The Emergent Church Movement or the Emergent Church Conversation as some of its advocates prefer to call it is a loosely connected network of

¹ See Alasdair I.C. Heron, *The Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). Heron provides an overview of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Bible and in the history of Christian thought. His treatment ends with the work of Juergen Moltmann, Eberhard Juengel, and Thomas Torrance; Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Welker provides a comprehensive systematic theology of the Holy Spirit; Veli-Matti Kaerkkainen, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2002) examines recent theologies of the Spirit in ecumenical and global contexts. Also see Lee Snook, “What the Theologians are Saying About the Holy Spirit” *Word & World* XXIII (Spring 2003), 187-196.

² For an overview see Cheslyn Jones et al., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For a proposal for Christian spirituality in postmodern times, see David F. Ford, “Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 269-290.

³ Robert Schaibley, “Measuring Spiritual Gifts” *Lutheran Quarterly* III (Winter 1989), 423-442.

⁴ Norman E. Nagel, “The Spirit’s Gifts in the Confessions and in Corinth” *Concordia Journal* XVIII (July 1992), 230-243.

pastors, mission leaders and theologians looking for a new way of defining Christian identity and mission in a postmodern setting. It is most often associated with Brian McLaren, the pastor of a non-denominational church, Cedar Ridge Community Church in the metropolitan Baltimore area. Although, as McLaren puts it, he slipped into the ministry through the back door having no seminary education, he has become a prolific author and conference speaker. Among his many books and articles, *A Generous Orthodoxy: 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* was published by Zondervan in 2004 and has quickly become something of a defining text for the movement⁵.

As the title of McLaren's book amply indicates, the movement is eclectic but it is not rootless. McLaren, like many of the significant figures associated with the Emergent Church grew up in a fundamentalist church (Plymouth Brethren). His own pilgrimage included involvement with the Jesus People and time in a charismatic Episcopal church and in various evangelical communions before becoming pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church. In various ways, the Emergent Church Movement may be seen as both a product of and a reaction against American Evangelicalism. The term "emergent" was gleaned from forestry where "emergents" refer to small saplings that spring up in the shadow of trees and while at first these young plants appear to be insignificant, dwarfed in the shade of older, full grown trees, they eventually thrive and take the place of the older trees as they die off.⁶ In the late 1990's this term was taken by those associated with the Leadership Network's Young Leader Network to identify a new approach to youth ministry and ultimately to the understanding of the church itself. In addition McLaren, Leonard Sweet has become a prominent voice in the movement arguing that in contrast to both traditional evangelicals and seeker-sensitive evangelicals, ministry in the twenty-first century should be experiential, participatory, image-driven and connected. Hence the acrostic EPIC.⁷ Robert Webber sees the movement as younger evangelicals attempting to find a place in a changing world.⁸ Unlike the seeker-sensitive focus of the mega churches, the Emergent movement is critical of programmatic approaches to evangelism with congregations housed in large facilities. Most Emergent church gatherings take place in homes, coffee shops or remodeled warehouses. One representative of the Emergent movement, Carl Raschke, argues that the Church Growth movement was yet another example of the church's captivity to modernism as it relied "on rational strategies of technocratic engineering."⁹

⁵ The first part of the title of McLaren's book, "a generous orthodoxy" comes from a phrase coined by the late Yale theologian Hans Frei (d. 1988) who is often described as the father of "post-critical" narrative theology.

⁶ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 275-276.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 40.

⁸ See Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

⁹ Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2004), 156.

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger see the Emergent Church as a deconstructionist ecclesiology: “Emerging churches utilize the kingdom as a tool to deconstruct all aspects of life including virtually all church practices. They understand that the kingdom gives rise to the church, not the other way around. Forms and structures are variable in emerging churches, especially in comparison to new paradigm, purpose-driven and seeker churches, which keep most of the traditional structures intact. These older movements maintain an emphasis on paid senior pastors, the Sunday service as what constitutes church, outreach that focuses on lapsed suburban professionals, and the idea that Christians come to church, primarily understood as the church building. Utilizing the kingdom of God paradigm as a tool of deconstruction, emerging churches dismantle many forms of church that, viable at one time, increasingly represent a bygone era.”¹⁰

The testimonies of numerous writers in *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic* are stories of ministers or para-church leaders who became disillusioned at market-driven Church Growth, hard-edged fundamentalism but left cold by the sterility of mainline liberal Protestantism. Todd Hunter, formerly a national director for the Vineyard churches describes his own background: “I was raised in an ultra-liberal United Methodist church, converted into a ‘fundamentalist-light’ church; experienced the full-blown, fire-hose blasting charismatic movement, sought to win others to Christ via crusades and the seeker movement; and drank deeply from the well of church growth theory.”¹¹ Spencer Burke spent twenty years on the staff of Mariner’s Church in Irvine, California – a church with over 10,000 in worship each weekend. Complaining of what he calls “spiritual McCarthyism,” Burke rejected the rigidity of his fundamentalist past and resigned his position at Mariners to form *TheOoze.com* in 1998 as space for the nurture of postmodern disciples. He writes “I’ve come to realize that my discontent was never with Mariners as a church, but contemporary Christianity as an institution.”¹² Jay Bakker, son of the televangelist Jim Bakker and Tammy Fay and Chuck Smith Jr son of the well-know southern California pastor of Calvary Chapel both contribute chapters describing their frustration with Evangelicalism and their embrace of what they see as an emerging form of Christianity that escapes the pitfalls of the past.

While the leaders of the Emergent Church are critical of what they describe as the rationalism of modernity, they are not anti-intellectual. The list of theologians most often cited by Emergent Church thinkers include Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf, Lesslie Newbigin, Nancy Murphy, James McClendon, John Franke, Robert Webber, N.T. Wright, David Bosch, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Frei, Clark Pinnock and Walter Brueggeman. Scholars associated with Fuller Theological Seminary and a broad neo-evangelicalism, especially those who see themselves as “post-foundationalists” figure most prominently in the shaping the theology of the movement.

¹⁰ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2005), 96. I am grateful to Seminarian Ross E. Johnson for directing me to this book and for his ongoing conversation on the Emergent Church.

¹¹ Mike Yaconelli (editor), *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

A common theme in the *Stories of Emergence* is the identification of old-line liberalism as well as fundamentalism, consumerist evangelistic techniques, evidentialist apologetics, and absolutistic ethics as relics of modernity. Raschke, rather optimistically asserts that “To stand up to both liberalism and fundamentalism we need merely to overcome modernism.”¹³ McLaren anticipates critical readers who argue that his approach to Christianity is an evasive smokescreen for a denial of historic tenets of biblical faith. He writes “Speaking of smoke, this book suggests that relativists are right in their denunciation of absolutism. It also affirms that absolutists are right in their denunciation of relativism. And then it suggests that they are both wrong because the answer lies beyond both absolutism and relativism.”¹⁴ Like his mentor, the recently deceased Baptist theologian, Stanley Grenz, McLaren takes it as a given that postmodernism is now normative and theology must adapt itself accordingly.¹⁵ Such an adaptation is what McLaren seeks to accomplish in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*. While the subtitle of his book is admittedly a mouthful, and a confusing mouthful at that, it does indicate how the author sees theology and church life configured in postmodernity.

McLaren holds that such a reconfiguration of theology is necessary for the sake of Christian mission. Hence, the first item in his subtitle is “missional.” Critical of both the conservative preoccupation with “Jesus as the personal Savior” and the liberal captivity to modernity, McLaren sees missional Christianity as both communal and cosmic. If Evangelicals were too narrow in their focus on salvation as personal redemption and liberals too “this worldly” in their efforts to build a humane society, then Emergent Christianity will endeavor to evangelize unbelievers into an authentic community that is historically rooted and relevant while transcending time and space. The cosmic nature of this community leaves open the question of who is in and who is out. The old debates between universalism and salvation through faith in Christ alone are rendered futile.

Evangelical is the second descriptive word for McLaren. Hesitating to identify himself as an “an Evangelical of the big-E type,”¹⁶ for this would place him in league with the Religious Right and fundamentalism, McLaren nevertheless cherishes an evangelical identity that is characterized by a high respect for the Scriptures, an intimacy with God, and a passionate desire to share Christ with others.

McLaren sees himself as Post/Protestant. With this pair of words, he describes himself as one who is protesting or “pro-testifying”¹⁷ to use his words so that the Christian community might be restored to God’s heart. McLaren inquires “What might such ‘post-Protestant Christianity’ be like? People like you and me can, with God’s help, be the ones to help answer that question in the coming decades, not just by what we say but how we live – and especially how we love our neighbors.”¹⁸

¹³ Raschke, 32.

¹⁴ McLaren, 38.

¹⁵ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 169-171. For an insightful critique of Grenz and other Evangelicals who embrace postmodernism, see David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁶ McLaren, 116.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

According to McLaren, the liberal/conservative divide within Christianity reflects an unhealthy reactivity with conservatives responding to the worst in liberalism and vice versa. Conservatives sought to establish the truth claims of Christianity against the acids of modernity while liberals became far too complacent with modernity. Both engaged in heroic attempts to preserve Christian faith but at a price that was too high. Thus McLaren writes “When I imagine what a generous orthodoxy can become, I realize I must seek to honor both conservative and liberal heroism. And when I do, I want to consider myself both liberal and conservative. I must learn from their mistakes, and when I do, I don’t want to be boxed in either category. Instead they can look up for a higher way and look ahead to the new fields of opportunity and challenge that stretch from here to the horizon, where the terms *post-conservative* and *post-liberal* may be helpful for a while, and then the whole polarizing vocabulary can be, I hope forgotten.”¹⁹ McLaren sees a convergence between these polarities at least imaginable from an Emergent Church prospective.

Mystical/Poetic is the category McLaren uses to describe the approach to theology in the Emergent Church. A non-prosaic faith will be characterized by imagination and intuition, awe and reverence. It will move beyond the arid categories of rationality and live within an unseen universe where truth is poetry not fact. It is in this sense that McLaren wishes to see himself as biblical. The inspiration of the Scriptures will no longer be a proposition to be debated by fundamentalists and liberals but a reality demonstrated by the power of the biblical narrative to inspire mission and generate a community of good works. Biblical truth will be experiential truth.

This leads McLaren to declare himself as Charismatic/Contemplative. At this point, McLaren reflects the place of Pentecostalism in his own life. It was from the Pentecostals and Charismatics within mainline denominational groups such as the Episcopal parish where he maintained membership for a time that he came to see that the Spirit of Jesus “is real, active, powerful, present and wonderful.”²⁰ Here he learned that the Spirit is “one step beyond the normal.”²¹ Yet he laments that charismatic Christianity could not live up to the expectation to always deliver a high-voltage experience and that all too often excitement was turned into fatigue as religious salesmanship created a market of charismatic consumers. Sometime more was needed to ground and supplement the elusive energy of the charismatic Christians. This, McLaren, believes is found in contemplative spirituality. He writes “If charismatics gave me my high school diploma in the ways of the Spirit, it was from Catholic contemplatives that I entered an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts of the Spirit.”²²

In light of his previous critique of fundamentalism and mainline Protestantism, the next pair of words might come as a surprise. McLaren professes to be a Fundamentalist/Calvinist. Yet in embracing these labels, McLaren redefines them

¹⁹ Ibid., 140.

²⁰ Ibid., 174.

²¹ Ibid., 175.

²² Ibid., 175.

claiming that Fundamentalism was originally a movement attempting to create a unity on five points thought to be fundamental to Christianity and thus allowing freedom in doctrinal matters thought to be less important. “For me” McLaren writes “the fundamentals of the faith boil down to those given by Jesus: *to love God and to love our neighbors.*”²³ Although he is troubled by what he sees as philosophical determinism in the theology of John Calvin, he expresses appreciation for the intellectual rigor of Calvinism and its commitment to the notion of *semper reformanda*, the church is always reforming. In keeping with this spirit, McLaren offers his own rewrite of TULIP (T-Triune Love; U-Unselfish Election; L-Limitedless Reconciliation; I-Inspiring Grace; P-Passionate, Persistent Saints). “Reforming in this way, the Reformed faith of today would be both revolutionized and revolutionary, a nightmare to some, a dream for others. Be that as it may, I would hope that these are already in fact the true colors of the best of the Reformed tradition.”²⁴

McLaren claims that he is an “Anabaptist/Anglican.” He sees in the Anabaptists a strong emphasis on personal commitment, an understanding of faith as a way of life that is embodied in a community willing to posture itself against modernity in a radical way and a peace ethic. He appreciates Anglicanism for its ability to practice beauty in the liturgy, its skill at living within the tension of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience in such a way as to allow for compromise within an ecclesial structure that remains communal. McLaren also sees himself as a Methodist for this tradition combines both personal piety with concern for the poor. Within Methodism, McLaren sees a catalytic energy that will enrich emerging communities of faith: “...it will empower ‘lay’ people, realizing that baptism itself is a kind of ordination to ministry and that the purpose of discipleship is to train and deploy everyday apostles. And like the earliest Methodists, it will see discipleship as the process of reaching ahead with one hand to find a mentor a few steps up the hill, while reaching back with the other to help the next brother or sister in line who is also on the upward path of discipleship.”²⁵

Confessing that he had to lay aside a host of Protestant prejudices, McLaren adds “Catholic” to his list of descriptors- both with a little c and a big C. From Catholicism, McLaren asserts he has learned to appreciate the unity and holiness of the church, an appreciation for the sacraments, liturgy, tradition and the place of Mary. It was the catholic influence that led McLaren to introduce the recitation of the Nicene Creed and other liturgical elements to the worship at his Cedar Ridge Church. He also notes that it is from Roman Catholics that other Christians can learn how to party and how to deal with scandal.

The final descriptive phrases in McLaren’s subtitle move away from confessional/denominational labels to more general categories. “Why I am Green” asserts the author’s appreciation for nature and the need for Christians to articulate an ecologically-sound doctrine of creation. “Why I am Incarnational” does not deal so much with classical distinctions of the two natures in Christ as it does with God identifying

²³ Ibid., 184.

²⁴ Ibid., 197.

²⁵ Ibid., 200.

Himself with humanity in the person of Jesus, of God becoming welcoming and hospitable in Christ and the implications that this has for missional Christianity. The book concludes with McLaren's apologetic, "Why I am Emergent" and two short chapters that offer a prognosis for the future.

In examining *A Generous Orthodoxy* and other texts produced by McLaren and others more or less identified with the Emergent Church Movement several key themes surface that are reflective of contemporary spirituality. There is an ecumenism which is both eclectic and elastic. As we have already observed in McLaren, particular themes from a variety of Christian traditions are highlighted so as to form a mosaic of beliefs that complement rather than contradict each other. It is yet to be seen how expansive this emergent ecumenism is. In his discussion of missions and the relationship of Christianity to other religions, McLaren is most generous. But is he orthodox? Setting the Apostles words in I Corinthians 9 ("I have become all things to all men that by all possible men I might save some") against the particularity of Jesus is the move that McLaren finally makes and it is not difficult to see why his critics accuse him of universalism.²⁶ Here it seems that McLaren is reflecting a sentiment expressed by several of his neo-evangelical mentors.

In their book *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Stanley Grenz and John Franke suggest that the Spirit who speaks through the Scriptures is also communicating through creation: "Because the life-giving Creator Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit's voice can conceivably resound through many media, including the media of human culture. Because Spirit-induced human flourishing evoke cultural expression, we can anticipate in such expressions traces of the Creator Spirit's presence. Consequently, we should listen intently for the voice of the Spirit, who is present in all of life and therefore 'precedes' us into the world, bubbling to the surface through the artifacts and symbols humans construct."²⁷ Another Evangelical theologian, Amos Young contends that it is possible to discern the work of the Spirit in other religions.²⁸ These arguments, although less nuanced, are expressed by McLaren in his discussion of Christianity and world religions. As McLaren sees it charity drives him to adopt a dialogical rather than conversional approach to missions. In McLaren's model, Christ brings to perfection that which the Spirit has already initiated at some level in human culture.

Missions in the paradigm of the Emergent Church, is not about bringing the faith-creating word of the Gospel to those who are without Christ. Rather it is relational. It is entering into friendships and conversation so that the presence of Christ may be identified and

²⁶ See *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 168-169. Also see R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 143-155.

²⁷ Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 162.

²⁸ Amos Young, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105-128. One Emergent Church leader, Spencer Burke, tells the story of going to a Buddhist temple with members of his church and practicing guided meditation in order to celebrate the many ways God is revealed. See Gibbs and Bolger, 132-133.

celebrated. As Raschke puts it “the unknown gods of contemporary culture do not have to be resisted so much as renamed, reclaimed, and redeemed.”²⁹

Emergent Church thinkers see it necessary to make a shift away from theological propositions to a theological narrative. Here, of course, they are drawing on a methodology that has been in vogue in mainline circles for several decades. Propositional theology is seen to be an artifact of the Enlightenment while the narrative approach is argued to be both more biblical and more congenial to the postmodern period. Meaning is said not to be found in doctrinal asserts but in stories that are constitutive of reality. Propositional claims are said to be rationalist while narrative is experiential.³⁰ These stories “are not about what happened. They’re about what is going on inside us. They’re about the deep hiding places in us that show up and reveal not only us, but God’s fingerprints on our lives”³¹ says Mike Yaconelli.

Related to the shift from propositional truth to experiential truth is the openness to the mystical in the Emergent Church. Often this is expressed by an appeal to the emotive as subjective truth is held to be congenial to the Gospel. One of the ironies in Emergent Church thinking is that in spite of their probing criticisms of traditional Evangelicalism, there remains a strong attachment to a religion characterized by intuition and feeling. Both the Jesus People of the 1970’s and the Charismatic Movement are hailed as precursors of a genuinely postmodern Christianity. Raschke lauds the revivalism of Charles Finney as a helpful slice of the Evangelical tradition that remains as part of the heritage of the Emergent Church. Raschke compares the polemics of Finney’s contemporary, Albert B. Dod of Princeton Seminary on revivalism with that of present day Evangelicals on the Emergent Church: “Finney and the revivalists of his day understood that rhetorical intensity and the aesthetics of worship have a lot more to do with prompting conversion than forcefulness of apologetics. This same spookiness that the journalist conveys in sketching the night scene at the frontier camp meeting compares with what might be written today about postmodern worship and prayer assemblies.”³²

²⁹ Raschke, 164.

³⁰ Here note the observation of Colin E. Gunton: “It must be realized, however, that the anti-foundationalist song is the voice of a siren. The allusion to fideism indicates the perennial weakness of non-foundationalist epistemologies. They may appear to be attempts to render their content immune from outside criticism and so become forms of intellectual sectarianism. In other words, they may appear to evade the challenges of the universal and objective, and to run the risk of the rank subjectivism and relativism into which their extreme representatives have fallen. Theologically speaking, they evade the intellectual challenge involved in the use of the word God” Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 134. Gunton maintains “The confusion of foundation with foundationalism may be at the root of the finally unsatisfactory appeal in much recent theology to narrative, for example in Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985). The problem with such appeals is that they either succumb to some form of subjectivism (‘I have my story, you have yours’) or they introduce in ‘narrativity’ an implicit and not always acknowledged form of foundationalism” (134, footnote 6).

³¹ *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic*, 20.

³² Raschke, 175.

The experiential is said to lead to an intimacy with God so that in the words of Raschke “faith is the gesture that seeks to speak *to* God rather than *about* God.”³³

Worship in the Emergent Church is experiential often marked with the use of icons and candles, incense and contemplative chant as well as contemporary praise songs and the place for personal testimonies. There is both order and spontaneity in liturgical assemblies that tend to be formed as intimate cell groups rather than large performance-oriented audiences. Little is made of Baptism. The Lord’s Supper is seen as a communal meal enacting hospitality.

In Emergent theology salvation is defined primarily with therapeutic images rather than redemptive ones. The language of sin is seldom employed and when it is used it is, it generally is used to describe injury or offense against self, the neighbor, the community or creation. It is seen as victimization or brokenness or perhaps as disobedience or rebellion but not as unbelief. So while the cross and resurrection still have prominent place within the Christian narrative, the overriding conceptuality is not atonement and the forgiveness of sins but the Spirit-led life in the kingdom of God. The Gospel is variously defined often with references to the work of N. T. Wright as he is understood of offering a narrative interpretation of the New Testament that is centered in the presence of the coming kingdom. Joel McClure offers this definition: “...The gospel is that God wants you to help solve that problem to participate with God through redeeming acts.”³⁴

Another Emergent leader explains “We have totally reprogrammed ourselves to recognize the good news as a *means* to an end – that the kingdom of God is here. We try to live into that reality and hope. We don’t dismiss the cross, it is still a central part. But the good news is not that he died but that the kingdom has come.”³⁵ The language of the Emergent Church is not shaped by the vocabulary of grace and faith but of acceptance and participation. Finally, McLaren argues God’s final judgment does not depend on Christ’s work on the cross but “how well individuals have lived up to God’s hopes and dreams for our world and for life in it.”³⁶

Emergent Church thinkers draw heavily on the Baptist theologian, James McClendon’s three-volume *Systematic Theology* as the first volume is devoted to ethics. McClendon argues that the church is a community “understood not as privileged access to God or to sacred status, but as a sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ.”³⁷ Numerous Emergent writers echo McClendon. McLaren writes “He (McClendon) begins with *Ethics* because a community of faith, in order to exist as a community at all, must have virtue sufficient to forgive, reconcile, and otherwise get along. Without roots in virtue, without practices that strengthen virtue, and without participatory experience of community made possible by virtue, no one is spiritually prepared to explore doctrine or pursue mission, McClendon implies. From this narrative

³³ Ibid., 56.

³⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, 56.

³⁵ Ibid., 54. On this point also see Wells, 218-232.

³⁶ Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 166-167.

³⁷ James William McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 28.

perspective, the practices of humility, compassion, spirituality, and love – which develop only in community – are essential to a good and healthy theology, more primal and important than scholarship, logic, intellect.”³⁸

However exotic and even eccentric the Emergent Church might appear to be on the surface, I would suggest that it fits within the context of the general landscape of North American notions about spirituality.³⁹ It is not nearly as counter cultural as its promoters advertise it to be. It is eclectic, consensual, affirming of self, open, optimistic, and pragmatic. Mark Ellingsen has argued that in North American spirituality “Select religious teachings are merely a vehicle for supplementing generally sound life instincts.”⁴⁰ This is amply demonstrated in the literature of the Emergent Church.

At the beginning of this paper I promised to at least probe the question of whether the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit have to do with spirituality or vocation. I will now attempt to make good on that promise. But before we do, it might be helpful to ask why it is that McLaren is his cataloging of all the things that he is left out the Lutheran label. While some might argue that Lutherans are just easy to over look, remarkably unremarkable or extraordinarily ordinary as Mark Noll describes us. It could be that McLaren just doesn’t know much about Lutherans or maybe he just doesn’t know what to do with Lutheran theology. Perhaps it just does not fit with his paradigm. Might it be that Luther (if not Lutheranism) is just too radical for the Emergent Church?

Luther, in fact, does make a radical move as he begins with doctrine not life, not human authenticity but authentic words from God in law and gospel. Ethics are not salvific; God’s doctrine is. Hence Luther writes in his Galatians’ lectures: “Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery mixed, as the saying goes ‘with vinegar.’ Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (I Cor. 13:7): here forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, providing that sin and error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. ‘One dot’ of doctrine is worth more than ‘heaven and earth’ (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have the articles of faith solidly established in the Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony

³⁸ *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 290.

³⁹ See descriptive and critical accounts of contemporary spirituality from a Lutheran perspective by James Kittelson, “Contemporary Spirituality’s Challenge to Sola Gratia” *Lutheran Quarterly* IX (Winter 1995), 367-390; Hans Hillerbrand, “The Road Less Traveled? Reflections on the Enigma of Lutheran Spirituality” in *Let Christ Be Christ: Theology, Ethics and World Religions- Essays in Honor of the Sixty-fifth Birthday of Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, California: Tentatio Press, 1999), 129-140; and Paul Rorem, “Augustine and Luther for and against Contemporary Spirituality” *Currents in Theology and Mission* XXX (April 2003), 96-104.

⁴⁰ Mark Ellingsen, *Blessed are the Cynical: How Original Sin Can Make America a Better Place* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 122.

among the churches.”⁴¹ Orthodoxy can never be so generous as to set aside God’s doctrine. That would be unbelief. On the other hand, the arena for generosity is life where sin abounds. There Luther argues charity is to prevail as Christians endure and bear the sins of the neighbor.

Missing Luther’s radical move, the Emergent Church begins with life not doctrine, with ethics not faith. While claiming to be generous, open, and tolerant, McLaren with his incessant focus on the necessity for authentic discipleship, obedience rather than knowledge, and lives characterized by compassion, slips into a rigidity that is unattainable. While the language might sound inclusive and undiscriminating, it is the language of the law. Is it not the case that if scratch an antinomian, you will kind a legalist underneath the surface? Or as George Marsden observes in his study, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief*, “Pluralism remains a basis for imposing uniformity.”⁴² The Emergent Church is not nearly as free from the dreary moralism that they decry. Gerhard Forde has helpfully observed that those who begin with the presupposition of freedom end in bondage.⁴³ Only a theology that begins with the presupposition that humanity is in bondage can end in freedom- the freedom of the Spirit.

For all of its rhetoric of the Spirit, the Emergent Church is a specimen of postmodern spirituality⁴⁴. This a spirituality that is more of the human spirit rather than the Holy Spirit, a spirituality that seeks to be free and questing, but finally succumbs to its own legalisms. Enthusiasm is always suffocating. On the other hand “... where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (II Corinthians 3:17).

I would suggest that the Lutheran alternative to reclaim a robust doctrine of vocation so often neglected. Vocation is the work of the Spirit, His calling to faith and life. Edmund Schlink begins his dogmatics with the locus on the Holy Spirit indicative of the fact theology does not begin with our speculation but with the Spirit who has called us to faith by the Gospel.⁴⁵ We cannot by the potency of our reason or by the depth of our conviction come to know Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith by the Gospel enlightening and sanctifying us with His gifts. The same Spirit who calls us to

⁴¹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986), 27:41-42.

⁴² George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 436.

⁴³ Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 44.

⁴⁴ In contrasting Christian faith with contemporary spirituality, David Wells argues: “In religion of a Christian kind, we listen; in spirituality of a contemporary kind, we talk. In religion of a Christian kind, we accept a gift; in spirituality of a contemporary kind, we try to seize God. In the one we are justified by the righteousness of Christ; in the other, we strive to justify ourselves through ourselves. It is thus that spirituality is the enemy of faith.” *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World*, 161-162.

⁴⁵ See Edmund Schlink, *Oekumenische Dogmatik* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983). Also Nagel: “The actual sequence is Third Article, Second Article, First Article. The Holy Spirit with the means of grace bestows the salvation gifts won for us by Christ. These gifts are received in faith. The life of faith is lived begiftedly, and so on then through the First Article and all its *dona create*” Norman Nagel, “The Spirit’s Gifts in the Confessions and Corinth,” 236.

faith calls us to life of love within the structures of creation or the three estates as Luther calls them. Both dimensions of our vocation-faith and life are devoid of what the Reformers identify as enthusiasm.

We are called to faith in Christ not by a story of our own choosing or a narrative of our own communal construction but by a Word that comes outside of ourselves. It is not just a word about Christ but the Word of Christ. It delivers the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection, it creates faith in the hearts of those who hear it when and where it pleases God. The rationalism that the Emergent Church so much fears in modernity is absent in Luther's understanding of the work of the Spirit in and through the Gospel. But Luther does not slide into a mystical enthusiasm divorced from history. He does not share the fear of the Emergent Church over assertions. Quite the contrary as his well-known words in the *Bondage of the Will* indicate: "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why the Holy Spirit is given the Christian from heaven in order that he may glorify Christ and confess Him even unto death...The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and the things that He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions – surer and more certain than sense and life itself."⁴⁶ Both Jew and Greek found the cross to be a scandal even so both the modernist and the postmodernist stumble over the proclamation of the crucified Jesus. Both seek after a form of accessibility and openness while God hides Himself to reason and emotion.

Carl Raschke's claim that "By relativizing language and theories of signification, postmodernism makes it possible to honor *the immeasurable holiness of God* in a manner that modern philosophy never could"⁴⁷ still leaves us with the *deus absconditus*, the God of mystery and majesty who is a terror. A mere switch of linguistics will not suffice. The theologies of the Emergent Church are not radical enough; they still leave human beings carrying the verbs. God remains, in these theologies, the object of our reflecting and acting. Enthusiasm and human works are of one piece.

The Spirit who calls us to faith through the externality of His Word also calls us to life in creation. Some within the Emergent Church have experimented with communal living. While such an arrangement is not characteristic of the movement in general there is a distinctly monastic flavor here. While critical of perceived isolationistic tendencies in Enlightenment Christianity, Emergent thinkers have not been exempt from a sectarianism of their own. Belonging and community are stressed. But the community that is yearned for transcends the ordinary structures of family, congregation and civic sphere; it is the company of those who voluntarily embark together on a higher journey of a deeper, more authentic spirituality shaped by growing conformity to the life of Jesus. In this sense, the Emergent Church can be seen as a postmodern unfolding of Anabaptist movements in the sixteenth century and restorationist movements in the nineteenth century. It is not as novel as many of its adherents claim.

As Luther and the Lutheran Confessions understand vocation, it is not a call of the Spirit out of the world but the calling of the Spirit to live within the mundane estates of

⁴⁶ *Luther's Works*, 33:21, 24.

⁴⁷ Raschke, 32.

congregation, family and government. Of these estates, Luther speaks of these orders as the most fundamental forms of human existence.⁴⁸ In his *Confession Concerning Christ Supper* of 1528, Luther calls them “religious institutions”⁴⁹ for they are sanctified by God’s Word for the service of the neighbor. They are spiritual, Luther says, for “everything our body does outwardly and physically is in reality done spiritually (and must be acknowledged as such) if God’s Word is added to it and it is done in faith. Nothing can be so material, fleshly or outward but that it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. ‘The spiritual’ is nothing other than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, and it makes no difference whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or ethereal.”⁵⁰ For Luther the “thank, praise, serve and obey Him” of the Catechism’s explanation of the First Article comes to expression in the daily prayers and the table of duties at the end of the Catechism. The Third Article takes us to the Second Article and through it to the First Article.

There is a line in Adolph Koeberle’s *The Quest for Holiness* that is attributed to Luther, “When God is gone, the fairy tales arrive.”⁵¹ The postmodern period is a time of fairy tales. In particular it is the fairy tale that we can be like God, creating our own reality, authoring our own stories and having a hand in our own redemption. The Holy Spirit is “the shy member of the Trinity” to borrow the words of William Hordern and Frederick Bruner for He does not preach Himself but Christ⁵². And the preaching of Christ does not create spirituality but faith, faith that is active in love for the neighbor. There is a difference.

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⁴⁸ *Luther’s Works*, 1:103-104. Here also see Oswald Bayer, “Nature and Institution: Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Orders” *Lutheran Quarterly* XII (Summer 1998), 125-159.

⁴⁹ *Luther’s Works*, 37:365.

⁵⁰ Cited in Kittelson, 384.

⁵¹ Adolph Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, trans. John C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), 41.

⁵² See Frederick Dale Bruner and William Hordern, *The Holy Spirit-Shy Member of the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984). Also recall Luther’s words in his John sermons: “Here Christ makes the Holy Spirit a Preacher. He does so to prevent one from gaping toward heaven in search of Him, as the fluttering spirits and enthusiasts do, and from divorcing Him from the oral Word of the ministry. One should know and learn that He will be in and with the Word, and that it will guide us into all truth, in order that we may believe it, use it as a weapon, be preserved by it against all the lies and deceptions of the devil, and prevail in all trials and temptations....The Holy Spirit wants this truth which He is to impress into our hearts to be so firmly fixed that reason and all one’s own thoughts and feelings are relegated to the background. He wants us to adhere solely to the Word and to regard it as the only truth. And through this Word alone He governs the Christian Church to the end” (*Luther’s Works*, 24:362).