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Voice of 'sage' inspires admiration, intense criticism

Alternative to liberal, conservative emerges with unconventional outlook

By [JOHN BLAKE](#)

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Brian McLaren was about to speak at a church youth convention when his host asked the audience a provocative question.

How many considered themselves liberal Christians? A smattering of hands and a few cheers. Conservative? Louder claps and hoots. Then he asked: "How many of you wish there could be a third alternative?"

The room erupted with cheers. The host then introduced McLaren as a fellow pilgrim in search of the third alternative. The nondenominational evangelist — labeled a "sage" for "emergent church," a growing theological movement aimed at a new generation — was surprised by the response but says he understands it now.

"One of the reasons they cheered is their sense that the polarization between conservative and liberal, evangelical and mainline, left and right has gotten so extreme, it seems like a cartoon," he says. "People have this sense that we've lost our balance."

Atlanta has a chance Tuesday to see what the cheering is about. The man who also derisively has been called the "true son of Lucifer" will speak at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur during a three-day conference.

The 50-year-old author was named by Time magazine as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America, a "paradigm shifter" whose 2001 book, "A New Kind of Christian," resonates with young Christians and ministers across denominational lines.

The emergent church (some prefer the term "emerging") sprang from conversations that McLaren and a group of pastors started in the mid-1990s. Talk revolved around a simple question: How can Christianity make sense to a new generation shaped in a post-Christian culture era?

Emergents provided an answer — change the way we do church and focus on Jesus. Some of their solutions:

- Have church in a living room instead of a grand hall.
- Encourage ordinary people to share their experiences instead of a preacher delivering a one-hour sermon.
- Change worship — add silence, art, experiment with prayers.

The movement's innovations go beyond worship and extend to theology.

McLaren isn't preoccupied with hell — who's in and who's out. Emergent church leaders don't view other religions, science and liberals as enemies.

McLaren says the center of the emergent church's desire is to "re-center the Christian message on Jesus and the teachings of Jesus." He wants to dispense with an inward faith focused only on personal salvation.

The emergent movement also is critical of megachurch "seeker services," where megachurches treat parishioners as religious consumers who need the gospel tailored to meet their needs.

The movement seeks new types of pastors, says Eddie Gibbs, co-author of "Emerging Churches" (Baker Academic, \$17.99).

"They're suspicious of celebrity. They want saints," Gibbs says. "A celebrity is someone who keeps their distance. A saint is approachable and open to examination."

Troubling, dangerous?

McLaren embodies this new type of pastor to many emergent church leaders. Talk to them, and they use the same words to describe him: accessible, gracious, vulnerable. He's a man who will joke about his "Buddha belly" and bald head and who loves playing acoustic guitar and listening to Bob Dylan.

Troy Bronsink, an emergent church leader in Atlanta, first heard McLaren speak at an emergent event and became friends. He says he once dropped by McLaren's home in suburban Washington, D.C., unannounced for pastoral advice.

McLaren dropped everything and made time to talk to him, saying, "That's just what friends do."

"I can think of a number of times when I've called him on his cellphone, and he's picked up right away, which is amazing, given how busy he is," says Bronsink, senior pastor of Church of St. Andrew in Sandy Springs.

McLaren didn't set out to be a preacher.

He was raised in Rockville, Md., in a fundamentalist family. He attended Plymouth Brethren Church, where he says he was "unfathomably bored" and turned off by hypocrisy.

He says he grew up with plenty of doubts about his conservative upbringing. He thought evolution was "elegant, patient and logical." He couldn't understand why women were supposed to be submissive to men, rock music was of the devil, and all Catholics were consigned to hell. Ministry was not on his mind.

"I wanted to teach English," he says. "I loved literature."

A series of events changed his mind.

As a teenager, he says he began meeting Christians his age whose sincerity had a big impact on him. He also had an unusual spiritual experience one night that convinced him of God's reality. He was outside at night, thinking and praying, when something happened.

"As I sat there, I just had this sense that I was loved by God," he says. "I just felt that God knew my name, and that I mattered. I remember feeling like I was going to explode."

As an adult, he co-founded a church house in suburban D.C. It grew until it became Cedar Ridge Community Church. McLaren says his experiences with the house church convinced him that he was called to be a minister.

When McLaren began writing his books, he was thrust into another role he didn't expect — emergent church leader.

In his books, his probing questions captured the attention of ministers and young Christians wrestling with the same questions. Should Christians spend energy on converting people of other faiths? Are Christians too preoccupied with

getting to heaven at the expense of working for a better Earth? Is there a middle ground between condemning and accepting homosexuals?

"A lot of people feel it in their guts, and Brian is able to say it in a way that people find very compelling," says Tony Jones, an emergent church leader and author of "The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life" (Zondervan, \$12.99).

Some, however, find his work troubling — even dangerous.

In his blog, Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, describes McLaren's 2004 book "A Generous Orthodoxy" as a cop-out from answering difficult questions.

"We are not faced with an endless array of doctrinal variants from which we can pick and choose," he wrote.

"Homosexuality either will or will not be embraced as normative. ... We will either see those who have not come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as persons to whom we should extend a clear Gospel message and a call for decision, or we will simply come alongside them to tell our story as they tell their own."

In his blog for Moriel Ministries, James Jacob Prasch called McLaren a "son of Lucifer" for trying to establish a "pseudo church void of doctrine."

And Marty Duren, a local blogger (www.sbcoutpost.com) and pastor of New Bethany Baptist Church in Buford, says McLaren goes too far.


"Doubtless, Brian McLaren has been responsible for causing myself and others to reconsider long-held beliefs in an attempt to jettison all the 'man-made baggage' included in our accumulated doctrine — this aspect of his influence can be nothing but good," he says. "It is of a concern to me, however, that he has perhaps inadvertently encamped along paths outside the bounds of historical orthodoxy and Scriptural authority on his search for the truth."

McLaren notes the critics but says he's ultimately trying to teach another audience. In "A Generous Orthodoxy," he describes that audience as those "outside the church."

"A friend of mine once said that every new Christian should be equipped at baptism with a manure detector because there's plenty of it around in the church world, and I agree," he writes. "I've seen it and smelled it (and too often tracked it through the house). Sometimes, I've felt like giving up and walking away in search of fresher, healthier air. But there's something here that I love and can't stop loving, and that something is actually Someone."

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