

The background of the cover is a black and white photograph of an underwater scene. Sunlight rays stream down from the surface, creating a dramatic, ethereal atmosphere. In the upper portion of the image, a splash of water is captured in motion, with droplets and ripples. The text is overlaid on this scene.

EMERGING *Or* SUBMERGING

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EXPOSING THE EMERGENT MOVEMENT'S LIBERAL VIEWS

Emerging or Submerging
Exposing the Emergent Movement's Liberal Views

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All quotes by Rob Bell are taken from *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

Introduction

I wrote this short book to give a simple apologetic concerning Emergent theological views and to help uninformed Christians become aware of the dangers of this aberrant movement and thereby be protected from being sucked in by their smooth words and clever speeches.

Paul warned the Colossian believers many centuries ago not to be led away by philosophy, vain deceit, or the basic principles of the world. That warning has particular relevance to the views of those in the Emergent movement, for they have essentially embraced postmodern philosophy, and in the process (whether intentionally or unintentionally) have rejected historic biblical Christianity.

Brian McLaren and Rob Bell, the two most well-known advocates of “a new kind of Christianity” (which is another way of referring to the Emergent theological perspective) are unashamedly postmodern, as are all the movers and shakers in this movement. These men are fully convinced that we have passed out of the modern era and are now living in a thoroughly postmodern world. *So what’s the problem with that* you might ask?

The Problem with Postmodernism

The problem is that postmodernism's main tenet is that there is no such thing as absolute truth.

As one writer put it, "Postmodernity, in contrast to modernity, rejects any notion of objective truth and insists that the only absolute in the universe is that there are no absolutes. Tolerance is the supreme virtue and exclusivity the supreme vice. Truth is not grounded in reality or in any sort of authoritative 'text,' but is simply constructed by the mind of the individual" (Michael Kruger, "The Sufficiency of Scripture in Apologetics," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Spring 2001).

Ironically, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and others like them believe that postmodernism is *the truth* about the way things really are. But that in and of itself is a contradiction because their whole premise is that you can't really know what is true. Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction!

Since Jesus claimed to be the embodiment of absolute truth (I am *the truth*), I don't see how you can really embrace Him and simultaneously embrace a philosophy that denies the existence of absolute truth. What has actually become clearer as time has

passed is that these men have another Jesus who has replaced the Jesus of the New Testament.

Another thing we need to understand in order to make sense of the views of the Emergents is postmodernism's convoluted view of language. Postmodernists are deconstructionists who believe "that language cannot render truths about the world in an objective way." Because, according the postmodern thinker, "language is a cultural creation," meaning ultimately is shaped by what society finds acceptable (Gary L. W. Johnson. *Reforming or Conforming* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008]). Therefore, the Emergents insist that we cannot really know with certainty what the Bible says because it was written in another time and culture and we read everything through our own cultural lens and personal experiences.

One final thing about the Emergents that needs to be stated up front is their insistence on tolerance for everyone except Evangelical Christians. They are tolerant, even kind and loving toward Muslims, Atheists, Hindus, and Buddhists (which is all fine and good); yet strangely, they are intolerant and even hateful toward those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and Jesus the only way to the Father. Reading through their books, you get the sense that

they feel much the same as the liberal elites within the culture do: Christians of the conservative sort are the bane of society.

Within the Emergent movement there are many voices, but all are basically saying the same thing. In reading several books by Emergent authors I've often felt like I'm just reading the same book over and over again. Although I probably should be using McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity* (for there he finally lets the cat out of the bag and shows himself to be a true liberal), I don't really have the time or patience to wade through another McLaren rant; therefore, I'll stick with Rob Bell's hugely successful book *Velvet Elvis* as our text on Emergent theology.

Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith

You might wonder what in the world a "velvet Elvis" has to do with the Christian faith. Well, here it is. In Rob's basement, he has a framed image of Elvis Presley in velvet. These velvet paintings were quite popular in the 70s and would be considered by some as collector's items. Rob's point is that out of the many velvet Elvis's no two are exactly alike, but that's okay because they shouldn't be. They are all portraits of Elvis to some degree, but they all vary.

Some are better, some are worse. He compares this to the Christian faith. There are all kinds of different versions out there but no one version is right in comparison to the others. Rob Bell says *Velvet Elvis* is his version, if you will, of the Christian faith. Now I'll give this much to Rob, he's a creative thinker!

In the introduction to the book he writes, "I embrace the need to keep painting, to keep reforming." He goes on to say, "By this I *do not mean* cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music, sharper graphics, and new methods with easy-to-follow steps." In other words, he is not referring to externals. And when I talk about the problems with the Emergent movement, I am not talking about the externals either. I'm not addressing whether you have candles at your worship service or dim the lights or you have some art plastered on the walls of your meeting room. Those are just cultural things and with each passing generation of Christians, culture changes and Christians are going to express themselves somewhat differently.

What Rob is referring to is made clear in this statement: "I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived, and explained." Rob Bell is not talking about

peripheral issues, but real core Christian beliefs. This is the problem with the Emergent movement. It is an attempt to redefine the Christian faith along the lines of postmodern thought. Another way of defining postmodern philosophy is extreme relativism, which means essentially, anything goes. Whatever is right for you is right, or whatever the culture says is right and normal, that is what is right and normal.

The Emergent way of thinking is liberalism or theological and moral political correctness in the hippest, coolest package ever seen. It's artistic, emotive, expressive, and culturally relevant, especially with the youth of today. Externally, it's very attractive, but what people don't realize is that under this very thin veneer, some deadly ideas are being promoted. It looks and sounds so cool on the surface; after all, what's cooler than a velvet Elvis! But as we shall see, danger lurks just below the surface.

The Importance of Doctrine

As we make our way further into *Velvet Elvis*, one of the first things we find is Rob likening the great doctrines of the Christian faith to the different "springs" in a trampoline. My kids grew up bouncing on a big trampoline in our backyard, yet somehow I missed the great theological lesson in front of me. I'll come

back to the springs in a moment, but first let me say a word about doctrine.

Why is doctrine important to the Christian? On a practical level, our understanding of and adherence to the essential doctrines of the faith will directly affect how we live out our daily lives. More importantly, however, there are essential doctrines we must believe in order to be Christians in the first place. I will go even further to say that if we reject these essential doctrines, then we are rejecting historic, biblical Christianity, and therefore rejecting Christ.

Emergents and the Trinity

The first spring mentioned in *Velvet Elvis* is the Trinity, about which he says:

This three-in-oneness understanding of God emerged in the several hundred years after the resurrection (22).

Immediately, we see that Rob's understanding of the Scriptures and history are quite distorted by his liberal mindset. The doctrine of the Trinity did not develop "several hundred years after the resurrection"; there were certainly debates and discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity among various

councils after the apostolic age, but references to the Trinity were made repeatedly in the pages of the New Testament.

Jesus said, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). Paul, in his benediction to the Corinthians, said, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all*” (2 Corinthians 13:14). These are just two examples of the Trinitarian formula found in the New Testament, which was completed before AD 70.

Rob goes on:

It is a spring and people jumped for thousands of years without it. ... the springs aren't God. They have emerged over time as people have ... experienced and reflected on their growing understanding of who God is. Our words aren't absolutes. Only God is absolute, and God has no intention of sharing this absoluteness with anything, especially words people have come up with to talk about him (22-23).

Recall what I said about postmodernist's convoluted view of language: words only mean something to the person or the community they originate with and can never be trusted to express absolute truth or certainty. Therefore, Rob is really downplaying words. He is also subtly questioning biblical inspiration by referring to the Scriptures as "words people have come up with to talk about him [God]."

The doctrine of plenary inspiration says that the Bible is God's Word through which He reveals Himself to us, not *words that men have come up with* to talk about God! Here, Rob is not exactly denying the Trinity; in fact, he says he believes in the Trinity. What he is saying though is that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't that important—a bold insinuation in light of the New Testament's emphasis on the deity of Christ, which is an aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Christ cannot be God if there's no plurality in the divine nature. To say the doctrine is not that important, Bell is putting himself in the place of judging what's important to God and what's not. Since God saw fit to fully reveal Himself as triune through Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity is obviously more important than Rob believes it to be!

Emergents and the Virgin Birth

Moving on to another spring, Rob has this to say on the virgin birth of Christ:

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in ... What if that spring [the doctrinal position of the virgin birth] was seriously questioned? ... Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart? ... If the whole faith falls apart ... then it wasn't very strong in the first place ... God is bigger than the Christian faith (26-27).

What Rob Bell is saying is God is bigger than all of these doctrinal issues. In other words, he's implying that even if the virgin birth were not true, we could still be Christians, we could still love God, and Jesus still has the best way to live.

Now again, Rob says he believes in the virgin birth. But by these words, he is diminishing the vital importance of the virgin birth. You cannot throw out the virgin birth and still have Christianity. If Jesus had a dad named Larry, then He's no Savior. He's not the Messiah. He couldn't die for your sins. None of the things that the Bible goes on to say about Him could actually be a reality because they are predicated on the fact that He is God's Son, not Larry's son.

Rob Bell's undermining of essential, historical Christian doctrine is typical of the Emergent movement's methodological attack upon biblical orthodoxy and a strong indicator that the leaders of this movement are on the slippery slope to apostasy. Rob might still believe in the virgin birth but by flirting with liberal views he has undoubtedly undermined the faith of some weak believer; this is an offense so serious that Jesus said it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and to be cast into the depths of the sea than to offend one of these little ones who believe in Him (Matthew 18:6).

Emergents and the Resurrection

And with great power the apostles gave witness

to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

Acts 4:33

The resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and the central message of the gospel. Paul said, “*If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty*” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Later in this same passage, Paul said, “*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable*” (verse 19).

As we survey the New Testament, specifically the book of Acts and the Epistles, we see the apostles boldly and passionately proclaiming Christ risen from the dead— over and over again.

However, those within the Emergent movement don’t see the resurrection the way the apostles saw it. To get a better understanding of the Emergents’ views on this essential doctrine of the Christian faith, we return once again to Rob Bell’s book, *Velvet Elvis*.

Everybody’s god in the first century had risen from the dead. To claim a resurrection had occurred was nothing new. ... To try to prove there was an empty tomb wouldn’t have gotten very far

with the average citizen of the Roman Empire: they had heard it all before (164).

Here Rob Bell is subtly but certainly diminishing the uniqueness of the resurrection of Christ; equally significant is his promotion of liberal mythology as fact. To insist “everybody’s god in the first century had risen from the dead” is either blatant dishonesty or total delusion on Bell’s part. He is referring to the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults of the latter first and second centuries and wrongfully insisting that they were prevalent in the apostolic period. However, historian and apologist Dr. Edwin Yamauchi, a professor of Ancient History, Biblical Archaeology, and Early Church History at Miami University, has examined the entire matter on several occasions and considers groundless the case for any significant Dionysian or Mithraic influence on Roman society. His conclusion is that there is no evidence of the penetration of these cults into the West until the end of the first century AD.

But not only is Bell undermining the uniqueness of the resurrection of Christ, he is also striking out against the gospel as consisting of propositional truth—such as Christ dying for our sins and being

raised for our justification. The Emergents do not try to convince people of the truth in order that they can believe and be saved; they actually criticize and even mock those who would, accusing them of being stuck in modernity. In fact, they claim that early Christians did not emphasize or proclaim Christ's resurrection.

It is important to remember that we rarely find these first Christians trying to prove the resurrection actually occurred ... (164).

This assertion is ridiculous in light of the New Testament. In fact, we see Peter and John arrested in Acts 4:2 for preaching "*in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*" Later, verse 33 says the apostles "*gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*"

In Acts 17, we see Paul going to the synagogue and reasoning with the Jews, "*explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead*" (verse 3).

Finally, later in chapter 17, we see Paul speaking "*with the Jews and the Godfearing Greeks, as well as ... those who happened to be*" in the marketplace, "*preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection*" (verses 17-18, NIV). Even among the philosophers

at Mars Hill (ironically the name of Rob Bell's church) Paul is preaching to them the resurrection of Christ. Preaching and seeking to convince people of the resurrection was far from rare—it was the central message of the apostles! Emergents so detest propositional truth that they deny the obvious and try to get people to believe that the big attraction in the early church was the sense of community.

Again, Bell expresses this in *Velvet Elvis*:

So many passages about the early church deal with possessions and meals and generosity. They understood that people are rarely persuaded by arguments, but more often by experience. ... To the outside world, it was less about proving and more about inviting people to experience this community of Jesus' followers for themselves (164).

Here you see clearly the influence of postmodernism on the Emergent mind. Postmodernism emphasizes feelings and experience; therefore, it is diametrically opposed to propositional truth or argumentation. It's about having an experience; so the "many passages" (I can think of two or three at most) that talk about "possessions and meals

and generosity,” these are the key to understanding how the early Christians evangelized. According to the Emergents, the early church didn’t go out and preach that Jesus rose from the dead. They didn’t try to convince people that the resurrection was a fact, because, after all, everybody’s god had risen from the dead.

This type of teaching is a rejection of biblical authority and an attack on much of Evangelicalism’s historical understanding of the faith. It is indeed an attempt to reinvent Christianity.

Emergents and the Bible

You have magnified Your word above all Your name.

Psalm 138:2b

Jesus said in John 17:17, “*Your word is truth.*” One of the distinct beliefs of historical Evangelicalism is that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God.

Rob Bell, like many leaders of the Emergent movement, says that he believes in the inspiration of the Bible, yet his views on the Bible are not the same as those who hold to the historic Evangelical position.

Here's what he says:

The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not (32).

In contrast, John 1:1 says, "*In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Rob says God is not words. God says He is the *Word*. Amazing! Some of Rob's arrogance and hostility toward biblical inerrancy and authority come out in these quotes:

I think the Bible is the most amazing, beautiful, deep, inspired, engaging collection of writings ever. ... But sometimes when I hear people quote the Bible, I just want to throw up (42).

In many Christian settings, people are even encouraged to read the Bible alone, which is a new idea in church history (52).

I don't think that any writers of the Bible ever intended people to read their letters alone (53).

When you hear people say that they are just going to tell you what the Bible means, it is not true. They are telling you what they think it means. They are giving their opinions about the Bible (54).

To think I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a "pure" or "exact" meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to the very destructive reading of the Bible that robs it of its life and energy (54).

It is poems and stories and letters and accounts ... They aren't first and foremost timeless truths (62).

All of these statements are laced with both theological liberalism and postmodernism. "We can't understand the Bible. We can't ever properly interpret it." That is a postmodernistic take on language and words. Postmodernism says there is no absolute truth. Although Bell probably wouldn't stand up in

his church and say, “there is no absolute truth,” what he would say is, “I do not believe that anybody can know absolute truth.” So it’s the same difference, practically. One says there is no such thing as absolute truth; the other says, if there is absolute truth, no one can know it.

What Rob and other Emergent thinkers and writers fail to accept is that the Bible is a living book. The words of Jesus are going to outlast the material universe itself. They have as much relevance today as they did at the time they were written, as Jesus Himself said, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away*” (Matthew 24:35). Now we would agree that it’s important to understand the Scriptures in their original context. But we would not agree that that is the exclusive application, meaning that it basically applied to early Christians in their cultural context but doesn’t necessarily apply to us in ours. We believe that the application of Scripture is essentially the same from generation to generation.

As Jude said, the faith was once for all time delivered to the saints (see Jude 3). Apostolic doctrine is the same for all time! Another one of Rob’s erroneous claims is that personal Bible reading was unheard of until modern times. He promotes the idea

that back in the apostolic period nobody really had personal access to the Scriptures and very few people could actually read. Not only is Rob a bad theologian, he's a poor historian as well. Cultures dating all the way back to before Abraham's time were literate cultures, some with massive libraries containing thousands of volumes. Of course, there were variations from culture to culture, but the Hebrew as well as the Greco/Roman cultures were literate. The biblical assumption is that people had access to the Scriptures and could read them. "*Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD and in His law he meditates day and night*" (Psalm 1:1a-2). New Testament writers all spoke as though everybody had access to these truths, which of course, they did. Postmodernism's claim that there is no absolute truth blatantly contradicts the word of Jesus who not only said that He was the truth, but also said that those who continued in His Word would *know* the truth, and the truth would set them free (see John 8:31-32).

Either Rob Bell and others like him who ascribe to this view have never read those verses, or maybe they have and just don't believe them. In the end it's really quite simple: either Jesus was right or the philosophers are right. I'll stand with Jesus.

Final Thoughts

In looking at the Emergent movement, we've seen its leaders, while not yet denying completely the foundational truths of the historic Christian faith, do not hold fast to the biblical teachings regarding the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, Salvation in Christ alone, and the inerrancy of Scripture. Instead, Emergents say that Christianity must be redefined. To conclude I want to make a few final points and observations.

Though they claim to be Christians with a fresh enlightenment, Emergents are nothing less than liberals masquerading as Evangelicals, espousing and promoting ideas that were refuted on the scholarly and academic level decades ago. A close look at their doctrine reveals that they reject the Bible's authority and the doctrine of salvation through Christ. This movement is not a new theological understanding, but rather a new manifestation of old heresies that must be resisted and opposed. We need to be aware of these aberrant views so we can avoid being sucked into embracing a false view of the Christian faith and end up shipwrecked.

If there was ever any doubt as to where this Emergent theology is leading, Brian McLaren's

book, *A New Kind of Christian*, makes it clear. In the introduction he writes, “I realize, as I read and re-read the Bible, that many passages don’t fit any of the theological systems I have inherited or adapted. ... Doesn’t the religious community see that the world is changing? Doesn’t it have anything fresh and incisive to say? ... the old show is over, the modern jig is up, and it’s time for something radically new.” In other words, the historic Christian faith, as revealed in the pages of the New Testament and understood by the saints from the first century onward, is to be reinterpreted to fit with the politically correct world-view of the twenty-first century.

Rob Bell and other Emergent leaders call for a reinvention of Christianity because, they claim, the traditional view has failed to bring about the gospel’s intended results. This quote from McLaren’s book, *Everything Must Change*, says it all: “More and more Christian leaders are beginning to realize that, for the millions of young adults who have recently dropped out of church, Christianity is a failed religion. Why? Because it has specialized in dealing with ‘spiritual needs’ to the exclusion of physical and social needs. It has focused on ‘me’ and ‘my eternal destiny,’ but it has failed to address the dominant societal and global realities of their lifetime: systemic injustice, poverty,

and dysfunction” (<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/books/brians-books/everything-must-change.html>). Not only does he oversimplify the gospel, he forgets that many Christians do serve the poor, the prisoners, and the hurting in the name of Christ. As a matter of fact, most philanthropy for the past two thousand years has been carried out by Christians, and this is still the case today.

Jesus and the apostles taught that man’s first and greatest need was to know God in a personal way. Jesus said He came to give us eternal life, which He then defined as knowing the Father and Jesus Christ whom the Father had sent (John 17:3). That happens when one hears and receives the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection. The Emergents say that Christians need to address the dominant societal and global realities: systemic injustice, poverty, and dysfunction and forget all this talk about a “personal relationship” with Christ. What they are really saying is leave your ideas about heaven and hell, sinners and saints behind and focus on the material and the temporal. The Emergents in the end seem to me to be more humanist than Christian. Their ideas are very materialist, very Marxist in some cases, and very much about saving the world in a literal, physical sense and ushering in a utopian age where

Jesus and all the other great religious figures (I'm not talking about Moses and the Prophets) of history collaborate to make a perfect society. Sometime ago, Rob Bell attended a gathering where he sat on a panel with the Dali Lama and actually referred to him as "your holiness." I wouldn't be surprised to see McLaren and Oprah join forces in the future; they are preaching essentially the same thing.

This is why we need to hold fast to the "*faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 1:3b) and keep boldly proclaiming the gospel, "*for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes*" (Romans 1:16b) and the only hope for this world.

Even as I write these words, the sun is already setting on the Emergent movement. As I said, with McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, he has shown himself to be a dyed in the wool liberal. He was able to fool some folks for a while, but those days are past, and the Emergent star is fading and will soon be only found amongst the dead denominations and movements that forsook the true and living God.

People are looking for something authentic, not something pretending to be authentic. Something

that quenches the thirst in their souls, that lifts the burden of guilt from their shoulders, that gives them hope that there really is a better world to come, something no man could dream up. That something is the gospel of Christ: God became a Man, took our guilt upon Himself, died in our place, and rose again, conquering our greatest enemy—death. He then ascended to heaven and is at the right hand of the Father, who sent the Holy Spirit to fill us with His power that we might serve Him until He comes again in glory to establish His eternal kingdom. And there we shall reign with Him forever and ever, amen!

