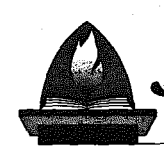

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There is something terribly wrong when we argue about the Bible more and enjoy it less.

CLARK PINNOCK

The Gospel only retains its proper strangeness, its power to question us . . . when we are faithful to its universal suprarational, supranational, supracultural nature.

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

I love Calvin a little; Luther more; the Moravians, Mr. Law, and Mr. Whitefield far more than either. I have many reasons likewise to esteem and love Mr. Hutton. But I love truth more than all.

JOHN WESLEY
(FROM A LETTER WRITTEN TO ELIZABETH HUTTON IN 1744)

The Road to Generous Orthodoxy

John M. Frame

There is considerable overlap between McLaren's concerns and mine. I too would like to see less doctrinal wrangling in the church and more love.[1] Like McLaren, I think it's important to learn from traditions other than our own (43–67)[2] and in controversy to be both more winsome to those who disagree with us and harder on ourselves. I like McLaren's way of putting it, that in theological dialogue we have the unfortunate tendency to compare our opponents' worst with our best (136, 140). And I have argued, like McLaren (105–14), for a missional concept of the church: the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 is the fundamental task of the church, so that everything the church does, including worship, ought to have an outward-facing aspect.[3] It has always seemed to me that the church (including its theology) tends to be healthiest when mission is in the forefront and least healthy when it is preoccupied with its own history and trying hard to prove itself right in controversies with other Christians.

In more theoretical matters, too, I resonate to his emphases, for example, on the importance of reading Scripture in its historical context (166–71), and the relational elements in the divine nature (76). I also have called attention to what McLaren calls the "hermeneutic of love" (18, note 6; 184–85), that knowledge itself is dependent on love in

important ways, as in 1 Corinthians 8:1–3.[4]

And it may be worth pointing out that one of McLaren's very negative critics is also one of mine (285). I would defend McLaren against that critic's charge that McLaren's gospel is "radically indeterminate." McLaren does teach not only generosity but also a generous *orthodoxy*. And he defines this orthodoxy often in the book. It is orthopraxis, the practice of humility, charity, courage, diligence (30), love of God and neighbor (184), and it is also an orthodoxy that

> consistently, unequivocally, and unapologetically upholds and affirms the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. It also acknowledges (rather perversely) that a number of items many hold as vital for orthodoxy are found nowhere in these seminal creeds and adds (somewhat sheepishly) that the creeds should never be used as a club to batter into submission people with honest questions and doubts. It also affirms (this is so Protestant) that Scripture itself remains above creeds and that the Holy Spirit may use Scripture to tweak our creedal understandings and emphases from time to time, so that new creeds are needed to give voice to the cry of faith today (28).[5]

I love the phrase "generous orthodoxy." It has a nice ring, like "compassionate conservatism," and it suggests a balance that should be a goal for us all. So if "generous orthodoxy" is a movement open to all who share these convictions and seek to practice them, sign me up.

But we need to get more specific. Both God and the devil are in the details. Probably every Christian tradition would say that in the faith there are some nonnegotiables, and there are some other doctrines or practices about which sincere believers may disagree. Where the nonnegotiables are concerned, we seek to be orthodox without being overbearing about it. Where negotiables are concerned, we seek to be generous. Christians of many traditions have appealed to the old saying, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."[6]

The problem is that Christians disagree about what the

essentials are. Doctrines that one group considers essential, other groups consider either untrue or nonessential. This is the reason (together with a general lack of spiritual maturity) why Christians appear, and often are, ungenerous to one another. So one would hope that a book like McLaren's, which seeks to encourage both orthodoxy and generosity in a fresh way, would try to help us resolve some of these disagreements.

But in that respect, the book is disappointing. Although McLaren renounces relativism (35, 286), it is not clear when and how he would fight for the truth over against error. As we've seen, he thinks Scripture and the two early creeds are fundamental. And he says,

> Let me go on record as saying that I believe sound doctrine is very, very, very important (Titus 2:1–3:11), and that bad doctrine, while not the root of all evil, is a despicable accomplice to a good bit of the evil in the world. In fact, this book is an attempt to correct what I perceive to be some bad doctrine, including bad doctrine about doctrine. (32)

In the book he fights hard for orthopraxis as he understands it, and for the orthodoxy of his distinctive emphases. But as for the orthodoxy of the teachings of the creeds and Scriptures, McLaren is far more eager to correct cocksureness than to show us how to correct doctrinal error. This reader, at least, gets the impression often here that we should not bother trying to do that, but should focus on other things. McLaren says that orthodoxy is "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" (33).

Perhaps that's the way it will be in heaven. It has not been that way in the present world. The Nicene Creed, which McLaren affirms, for example, is the result of a long period of fierce theological combat. Defenders of that creed, like Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, endured terrible persecution for the truths that McLaren affirms as orthodoxy. Athanasius did need to think about orthodoxy, and constantly.

Orthodoxy was under attack, and he saw it as his responsibility to defend it. Would McLaren have joined with him? This book leaves the answer to that question at least unclear.

I doubt that Athanasius would have claimed "to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever" (286). He was remarkably flexible on technical theological terminology, for example. Nor did Athanasius, so far as I know, use his doctrinal teachings to "batter into submission people with honest questions and doubts," but rather to combat those who were subverting the faith of believers and turning seekers toward serious error. There were some fundamental truths that he believed were biblical and worth contending for. If Jesus is not God, he said, then our worship is idolatrous and we have no salvation. The Bible too affirms the lordship of Christ over against any rival lordship and defines that conflict as spiritual warfare. The prophets, Jesus, and the apostles engaged in sharp theological controversy.

My biggest problem with McLaren is that he does not see doctrinal conflict of this kind as spiritual warfare, as something to engage the Christian's energy. He thinks he can bypass the need for such warfare by invoking a form of postmodern epistemology[7] and by making broad-based judgments against theological controversialists. He makes vague statements about how we must go beyond both the false certainties of modernism and the uncertainty of pluralistic relativism to some third alternative (287). I presume that he intends this book as an exhibition of that third alternative. But I can't find in the book, beyond general admonitions toward gentleness and self-scrutiny, any clear instruction on how to deal with the kind of doctrinal controversy Athanasius faced. McLaren proposes emergent models of Christian growth, in which earlier stages are preserved, yet transcended, in later stages (275–88),[8] but although these are interesting, they don't give us any direction on how we should intentionally seek to defend orthodox doctrine.

One cannot, however, invoke the Scriptures and creeds as authoritative without honoring the labor and sacrifice that went into their formulation, and without recognizing that

believers may again and again have to emulate that labor and sacrifice. And if we are to invoke the Scriptures when they enjoin generosity, it is important to have some reason to believe that the Scriptures are true and to oppose those who deny their teachings.

McLaren's actual discussions of doctrinal issues are often very weak. Contrary to his discussion on 161, for example, *God-breathed* in 2 Timothy 3:16 does not refer only to "creativity and life-giving vitality." To say that the biblical text is God-breathed is to say that it is the very speech of God, as truly his speech as the divine voice at Mount Sinai. As many evangelical writers have shown, that proposition does not entail a "dictation" theory of inspiration (as McLaren fears, 162, 252–53) or a mechanical view of the contribution of the human writers. It does, however, insure that what Scripture says, God says. Although *inerrancy* is an extra-biblical term (164), it is important for us to affirm that Scripture doesn't make mistakes, because God doesn't make mistakes.

Similarly, the deity of Christ, in Scripture as well as in the Nicene Creed that McLaren affirms, means much more than he says on 69–77. It is not just that when the disciples were around Jesus "they felt—no, more than that, they somehow *knew*—they were experiencing God" (72). One can "experience" God, of course, in all sorts of ways. Jesus is more than a source of such experience. He *is* nothing less than "God of God, light of light, very God of very God."[9]

McLaren's treatment of theological liberalism is perhaps the worst thing in the book. His parable on 141–43 gives a plausible reconstruction of the motives of some liberals, though I think not of most. But the issue here is not motives but, again, doctrinal content. I still believe with J. Gresham Machen[10] that liberalism is not a form of Christianity, but a different religion[11] altogether. Liberalism can tolerate, when it does not actually teach, wholesale denials of the doctrines of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which McLaren affirms. McLaren, again, offers us no resources for dealing with such outright denials of the biblical worldview and the biblical gospel.

I don't want to press these theological lapses too harshly against McLaren himself. He admits that he is untrained in theology (34). I wish he had chosen not to tread into these waters as deeply as he did, but sometimes "uncredentialed" writers like Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis do have insight not given to us official theological academics. And as I said, there is much in McLaren's book that is true and important. But he seems to lack any understanding of what is required to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). He tells us how *not* to do it, sometimes helpfully. But he doesn't tell us how to do it, except perhaps by the method of benign neglect. Therefore, he doesn't give us much useful guidance on how to balance this concern with the others he prefers to talk about. Rather, he seems to say again and again that we should just forget about defending orthodoxy. I have to regard that attitude as naïve. In theology as in international affairs, it is a dangerous world out there. I believe Scripture gives us some directions about church discipline (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5), about the governmental structure of the church (Ephesians 4:11–12), about standards for church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1–13), the authority of leaders (Hebrews 13:17), tests of orthodoxy (1 John 4:2), and so on that help us to fight these battles. But you would never guess that from reading McLaren's book.

McLaren's theological pacifism is seen also in his statements about non-Christian religions. Here too, much of his advice is good: We should see members of other religions as "beloved neighbors, and whenever possible, as dialogue partners and even collaborators" (35, see also 249). I agree with him that at times we should even protect the interests of other religions (251–58). And we should emphasize that the gospel brings blessings even to those who never come to believe in Christ. But again, McLaren is insensitive to spiritual warfare. The Bible is sharply negative toward false worship, the worship of idols, rather than the true God. Paul's missionary labors were not only positive but also negative: to turn the Gentiles away from their idols to serve Christ (as in Acts 17:29–31; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). McLaren confuses these issues by talking about "religion" in a negative way:[12] "Jesus did *not* come to create another exclusive religion . . ." (109). And he says, "I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus" (264).

Well, let's talk about worship then, rather than "religion." Clearly, followers of Jesus turn away from the worship of false gods (Hinduism) and from non-Messianic attempts to worship the God of the Old Testament. Once you break with the worship of Hindu gods, there is little reason to describe yourself as Hindu. Judaism is different, of course, because of its Old Testament roots. One can be a "Jew for Jesus," maintaining many of the cultural and liturgical distinctives of Judaism. But Jews for Jesus know as well as converts from Hinduism that embracing Christ involves a sharp break with their former worship, and it can also mean a break with their former communities, even very often with their own families. Insofar as McLaren confuses the issue of false worship, he confuses something of vital importance to the God of Scripture.

So although I too aspire to "generous orthodoxy," I think McLaren's book is often less than helpful in getting me there. And I fear that McLaren has loaded up the concept of generous orthodoxy with so many confusing arguments and unbiblical notions that he is likely to give generous orthodoxy a bad name. That, I think, would be a very unfortunate result.

Author

John M. Frame was raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and became a Christian through the youth and music ministries of his local church. He received his AB in philosophy from Princeton University (1961), his BD from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (1964), and his MPhil from Yale University in philosophical theology. He taught at Westminster/Philadelphia from 1968–80, at Westminster in California from 1980–2000, and is now professor of systematic theology and philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He has published ten books, including

Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, Apologetics to the Glory of God, Corenlius Van Til, and *Doctrine of God.* He and his wife, Mary, have two daughters and three sons.

Notes

1. See my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, available now at *www.thirdmill.org*); and "Machen's Warrior Children" in Sung Wook Chung, ed., *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 113–47. McLaren sings my song on page 125 where he points out, *"After protesting Catholic excesses, Protestants started protesting each other"* (emphasis his), and ascribes to this battling, in part, the proliferation of denominations.
2. Pages in parentheses are from McLaren's book. Other references are in footnotes.
3. As, for example, in my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 20–23.
4. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), especially 40–49, 153–55.
5. Compare 261. The primacy of Scripture, even over the creeds, has been another emphasis (some would say hobby) of mine. See *"Sola Scriptura* in Theological Method," appendix 2 of my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 175–201. I've also opposed the definition of orthodoxy in terms of what McLaren describes as "the historical accumulation of precedents" (28). See my *Knowledge of God,* 313–14.
6. This saying has been ascribed to Augustine, but I have not been able to locate it in his writings. Hans Rollmann thinks Peter Meiderlin wrote the earliest form of it in the early seventeenth century. See his "In Essentials Unity: the Pre-History of a Restoration Movement Slogan," at *www.believersweb.org/view.cfm—ID=976.*
7. I won't go into that here, because McLaren doesn't say much about it in this book, although he has invoked postmodernism elsewhere and mentions it in the introduction of the present volume (24).
8. These strike me as rather Hegelian, and they are open to the standard criticism of Hegelian philosophy: if any stage of thought can be negated and transcended by a later one, then how can we have any assurance of truth in the present? McLaren might think this question demands an illegitimate (shrink-wrapped) kind of certainty. But it seems to me this question arises with regard to *any* level of confidence in one's beliefs.
9. I could discuss other theological issues. I think McLaren's critique of Calvinistic "determinism" (186–87) is a caricature, most ungenerous indeed, and I don't think McLaren has a clue as to the devastating theological consequences of affirming the alternative of libertarian freedom. See my *Doctrine of God,* 138–45. Also, I think that McLaren's association of Roman Catholicism with an emphasis on the resurrection (64–65), though it fits his larger scheme rather neatly, does not take account of the deeply cross-centered piety in that tradition that we have lately noted, e.g., in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ.* And then there are McLaren's invocations of liberal political positions on the environment, feminism, and other issues which he elevates to matters of theological principle, while attacking fundamentalists for so elevating conservative positions (185).
10. *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923). Liberalism has, of course, changed its form since this book was written, and various hybrids between liberalism and evangelicalism have appeared. But Machen's argument against the distinctives of liberalism has never been answered.
11. I will not apologize for using this word. See below.
12. This is reminiscent of Karl Barth. I don't think it is helpful in theology to take a perfectly good word and give it a negative definition in order to achieve a polemical purpose.