

PREACHING OF THE REVISIONISTS IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

Johan Djuandy*

Abstrak: Bangkitnya pascamodernisme di Amerika Serikat pada awal 1990-an telah mempengaruhi pelayanan Kristen dalam banyak hal, termasuk ibadah dan khotbah di gereja. Nilai-nilai tradisional yang dianut gereja mendapat tantangan dari ide-ide pascamodernisme. Emerging church kemudian menjadi sebuah gerakan yang populer yang mengakomodasi nilai-nilai pascamodernisme. Dalam area berkhotbah, salah satu tantangan terbesar dari pascamodernisme adalah natur otoritatif dari khotbah dalam pandangan tradisional. Dua dari tokoh utama emerging church, Brian McLaren dan Doug Pagitt, menjadi contoh pergeseran dari tradisional ke pascamodern dalam filosofi khotbah mereka dengan menantang modus otoritas berkhotbah dalam gereja-gereja tradisional. Mereka adalah kaum Revisionis dalam emerging church, yaitu orang-orang yang meragukan doktrin-doktrin kunci injili dalam teologi dan budaya. Artikel ini akan mengeksplorasi filosofi dan metode berkhotbah dari kedua tokoh itu dan memperlihatkan bahwa cara pandang yang merendahkan Alkitab akan mempengaruhi cara seseorang menilai pelayanan berkhotbah.

Kata kunci: Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Revisionists, Emerging Church, Preaching, Postmodern

Abstract: The rise of postmodernity in the USA in the early 1990s has affected Christian ministries in many ways, including the worship and preaching in the church. Traditional values held by the church have been challenged by postmodern ideals. The emerging church then became a popular movement that accommodated the postmodern values. In the

* Penulis adalah dosen Homiletika dan Biblika Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Amanat Agung. Penulis dapat dihubungi melalui email: johan_djuandy@sttaa.ac.id

area of preaching, one of the most forceful challenges from postmodernity is the authoritative nature of preaching in the traditional view. Two of the emerging church leading figures, Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt, exemplify the shift from traditional to postmodernity in their preaching philosophies, challenging the authoritative mood of preaching in the traditional churches. They are the Revisionists in the emerging church, namely those who question the key evangelical doctrines on theology and culture. This paper seeks to explore the philosophy and method of preaching of these two individuals and attempts to exhibit that a low view of the Bible will affect the way one views preaching.

Key words: *Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Revisionists, Emerging Church, Preaching, Postmodern.*

Introduction

This paper discusses the emerging church movement in the USA, in particular the impact of the movement on the preaching philosophies and practices held by its leaders. The nature and definition of the movement will be discussed in the first part of this paper. In the second part, some core characteristics of the movement will be examined. The third part will be devoted to the analysis of the philosophy and method of preaching of the emerging church leaders, focusing on the examination of the two prominent leaders of the emerging church in North America, namely Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt. These two gentlemen have exhibited a radical shift from orthodox theology. Their understanding and ministry of preaching, therefore, reveal a great polarity from those of the traditional churches.

Defining the Emerging Church

The emerging church movement was originated from the early-to-mid 1990s, where the ministry to Generation X had become the focus among young pastors.¹ In this era the topic of postmodernity emerged to the scene, turning out to be the oft-talked about subject in the company of many American church leaders.² Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt were among the church leaders at that time who were initiating many postmodernity discussions, along with other key leaders like Dan Kimball, Mark Driscoll, Tony Jones, Chris Seay, and Dieter Zander.

McLaren, when pastoring Cedar Ridge Community Church in Baltimore-Washington area, found that modernity convictions have failed to reach the new generation in the postmodern culture. He was convinced that the time had come to switch to a new direction, committing “to be a Christian in a new way.”³ This new conviction has led him into a new paradigm when thinking about “church,

1. John S. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt* (Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 23. See also Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 30–34.

2. According to Gibbs and Bolger, the book of Middleton and Walsh (J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1995]) played a great impact on the rising of postmodernity topics. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 33.

3. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), ix.

Christianity, and the kingdom of God.”⁴ McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christian*, puts him in an influential position in the emerging church movement since in this book he dealt astutely with essential evangelical issues from a postmodern perspective.⁵

Pagitt, through the Young Leaders Network (YLN), has organized many young speakers to “initially converse on trendy Generation X ministries.”⁶ He is the founding pastor of a faith community called “Solomon’s Porch” in South Minneapolis. He discloses the values of this community in his book, *Church Re-Imagined*.⁷ Like McLaren, Pagitt’s Solomon’s Porch community seeks to live in a new way of Christianity. He contends that in this post-industrial time the community needs to move “to re-imagine the way of Christianity in [this] world” and thus he calls for “a new approach for a new age” in doing church.⁸

4. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 47.

5. In this book McLaren advocates a postmodern formula of Christianity. He presents his case through two primary fictional characters, Dan and Neo.

6. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 23.

7. Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). In this book Pagitt shows that every day in a week is a chance to do a particular spiritual formation for the members of the community. Spiritual formation is done through worship (Sunday), physicality (Monday), dialogue (Tuesday), hospitality (Wednesday), belief (Thursday), creativity (Friday), and service (Saturday). This book also includes journals from six members of Solomon’s Porch concerning their experiences with the spiritual formation in the community, primarily telling how the formations impacted their spiritual developments.

8. Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, 17.

Defining the movement like what McLaren and Pagitt have commenced is not an easy task.⁹ Basically, the term *emerging church* is used to describe “a broad, controversial movement that seeks to use culturally sensitive approaches to reach the postmodern, unchurched population with the Christian message.”¹⁰ The emerging church is a movement responding to the cultural shift from modern to postmodern. Dan Kimball mentions some characteristics of modernity, including: “single, universal worldview and moral standard, a belief that all knowledge is good and certain, truth is absolute, individualism is valued, and thinking, learning and beliefs should be determined systematically and logically.”¹¹ Postmodernity rejects these values of modernity, maintaining that “all truth is not absolute, community is valued over individualism, and thinking, learning, and beliefs can be determined nonlinearly.”¹²

9. Kevin DeYoung, in his critique of the emerging church, says, “The ‘what’ and ‘who’ of the movement are almost impossible to define . . . like nailing Jell-O to the wall.” Quoted in Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 22.

10. Matt Slick, “What Is the Emerging Church?” last modified 4 December 2008, accessed 21 November 2019, <https://carm.org/what-emerging-church>.

11. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 49.

12. Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 49–50. D.A. Carson, explaining the rejection of postmodernism to modernism, states that to postmodernism, “perhaps a culture plagued by absolutism needs a dose of relativism to correct what is wrong with it . . . If absolutism is the cancer, it needs relativism as the chemotherapy.” See D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 32. Carson also argues that among the issues in the move from modernism to postmodernism, the fundamental

In his book, *The Church on the Other Side*, McLaren presents five core values of postmodernism: 1) skeptical of certainty; 2) sensitive to context; 3) leans toward the humorous attitude and not going to be quickly intimidated by others' claims to know the truth; 4) highly values subjective experience; and 5) treasuring togetherness because it is a rare, precious, and elusive experience.¹³ These core values of postmodernism will affect the way of doing ministry, and particularly, preaching, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Traditional evangelical churches have a long history holding the modernity values in doing church. The emerging church, therefore, in one and another way can be perceived as a protest to the evangelical church with its modern values.¹⁴ Jim Belcher lists seven things that the emerging church was protesting against: captivity to enlightenment rationalism, a narrow view of salvation, belief before belonging, uncontextualized worship, ineffective preaching, weak

one is "epistemology—i.e., how we know things." Modernism, he asserts, is often pictured "as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty . . ." Postmodernism, "by contrast, recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage . . . without overbearing claims to being true or right" (Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 27).

13. Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 162–66.

14. Jim Belcher and Richard J. Mouw, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 38–40. Belcher demonstrates that "they (the emerging church) are unhappy with the evangelical church." Therefore, "they use words like *deconstruct*, *wholesale change*, *recalibration* and *dismantle* to describe what is needed" to reach a postmodern culture. See Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 38.

ecclesiology, and tribalism (sectarian).¹⁵ D.A. Carson rightly sees that the emerging church movement shares the point of origin, that is “traditional evangelicalism” and they “emerged” into something else, exhibiting “a flavor of protest, of rejection.”¹⁶ The leaders of the emerging church feel a great need for a new approach to ministry and this absolutely different approach requires the church to—in McLaren’s language—“debug its faith from the viruses of modernity.”¹⁷

Core Characteristics of the Emerging Church

The postmodernism values embraced by the emerging church transform the way its leaders think about almost everything regarding theology, church, and ministry. They see an urgent call to deconstruct the modern approach and to de-emphasize many modern values to

15. Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 40–43. On protesting the ineffective preaching, the emerging church views the traditional preaching as “old-style preaching” that “reduces spiritual formation to head knowledge” (Belcher, *Deep Church*, 42).

16. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 14–15. Pagitt himself seems cannot dismiss his evangelical root, despite he is no longer embracing the evangelical theology. He says, “I can’t ‘undo’ being an evangelical. It’s not like I can deny it. For me, it’s like when people say they are Catholic. They always are, whether they continue to go to mass or not” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 36). Pagitt, as well as McLaren, prefers to view themselves as *post-Protestant*. McLaren asserts, “I advocate the term *post-Protestant* as a move from Protestant to pro-testify. We must testify for some things. Our identity ought to consist in what we are for rather than in what we are against” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 38).

17. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 189. See also Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 29.

adapt to the culture of postmodernism. This new approach tends to question the absolutism held in modernism, including the doctrinal creeds and the meaning of biblical texts. Another notable approach of the emerging church is the emphasis on community and relationship over individualism. Matt Slick lists common traits of the characteristics of the emerging church as follows:

(1) An awareness of and attempt to reach those in the changing postmodern culture. (2) An attempt to use technology, i.e., video, slide shows, internet. (3) A broader approach to worship using candles, icons, images, sounds, smells, etc. (4) An inclusive approach to various, sometimes contradictory belief systems. (5) An emphasis on experience and feelings over absolutes. (6) Concentration on relationship-building over the proclamation of the gospel. (7) Shunning stale traditionalism in worship, church seating, music, etc. (8) A de-emphasis on absolutes and doctrinal creeds. (9) A re-evaluation of the place of the Christian church in society. (10) A re-examination of the Bible and its teachings. (11) A re-evaluation of traditionally-held doctrines. (12) A re-evaluation of the place of Christianity in the world.¹⁸

Gibbs and Bolger, after their extensive research, identify nine practices that are common to the emerging church, though, they remind us that not every emerging church incorporates all these

18. Slick, "What Is the Emerging Church?" As Slick also reminded us, one does not need to assume that every emerging church adherent will agree with all these points. Dan Kimball and Mark Driscoll, for example, never de-emphasize the absoluteness of Jesus Christ as the only solution to the problem of sin. See Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 109–50.

practices into its community. Among the nine practices, Gibbs and Bolger contend that there are three being possessed by every emerging church, namely (1) identifying with the life of Jesus, (2) transforming secular space, and (3) living as community.¹⁹ The other six identified practices are: (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.²⁰ In doing these practices, emerging churches become “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.”²¹ One can see that the emphasis of the movement is in living out the principles, values, and patterns that Jesus had exhibited in his life on earth. To be a true Christian seems to lie not in the beliefs but the deeds.

The weight of the first practice (identifying with the life of Jesus) is in modeling the life of Jesus by “living out and ushering others to the kingdom of God through communal practices, which are marked by service and forgiveness toward others.”²² Emerging church views the world as the kingdom of God where Christians are to join God in serving the people of this world. The focus of this kingdom is not narrowly bringing salvation to individuals, like the modernistic version of the gospel, but to spread a gospel that will bless all the world. McLaren shares about his meeting with many pastors who are

19. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 43–44.

20. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 45.

21. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44.

22. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 30.

now embracing this new kind of gospel and telling what they are doing:

They refuse to limit the focus of their preaching to the "needs" of saved and elect insiders, but instead keep the cries of the least, the last, and the lost alive in the ears of their listeners. They're writing new songs and preaching new sermons of justice and compassion, of mission and hope, of God-love and neighbor-love, of the glory of a God who loves, not just me/me/me, but the whole world—red and yellow, black and white, as the old Sunday school song said. In so doing, their sermons and songs *shift the focus from a self-centered gospel to a world-blessing gospel*.²³

Pagitt also shares the same understanding of this “world-blessing gospel” when he defines the characteristics of the emerging church. One of the characteristics he identifies is “seeing the church as not necessarily the center of God’s intentions.”²⁴ This approach clearly views that God is working in the world, not necessarily through the church, to accomplish his intentions for the world. The kingdom over the church as the vital paradigm in emerging church shifts the

23. Brian McLaren, “It’s All About Who, Jesus?” *CT Pastors*, accessed 23 November 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/july-online-only/022805a.html>. Emphasis mine. The gospel in emerging church is not so much interested in life after death as in life before death. Good news for emerging church primarily is not that Jesus has died on the cross but that “he had returned and all were invited to participate with him in this new way of life” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 54).

24. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42. So, Gibbs and Bolger assert, “the emerging church must be understood in light of the kingdom, for without the kingdom, the church forgets its primary calling” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 43).

emphasis of the gospel “from the person to the community as individuals unite to live out the life of Jesus in helping to serve and redeem the world.”²⁵ Unlike the traditional or modern view of church which accentuates the church meeting, the emerging church community underscores the community practices to serve the world in a way Jesus had done.²⁶

The second practice recognized by Gibbs and Bolger is transforming secular space. Modernity has created a division between the sacred and secular realm, and the church with traditional or modern values has long adopted this dualism in its practices. In this sacred/secular dualism, God is pushed into the sacred realm where he is supposed to be there. Secular space, on the other hand, is every sphere of life where God is absent. The emerging church rejects this notion of dualism in culture, advocating a process of “sacralization,” since “there are no nonspiritual domains of reality” and “all of life must be made sacred.”²⁷ For “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Ps 24:1 NIV), there are no longer “bad places, bad people, or bad times,” or things that could be referred to as secular.²⁸

25. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 32.

26. In the expression of Gibbs and Bolger, viewing God’s works in his kingdom as mission Dei, “Mission Dei replaces ‘come to us’ invitations with ‘go’ motivation” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 50–51).

27. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 66–67. Gibbs and Bolger define “sacralization” as “the process of making all of life sacred, represents the interaction of kingdom and culture.”

28. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 67.

Sacralization in emerging churches affects many aspects of the church, among others the worship. Gibbs and Bolger, for example, argue that sacralization deconstructs the sacred/secular dualism that separated the body from the mind.²⁹ The dualism caused modern worship to focus on the mind because it was sacred and neglecting the body because it was secular. Sacralization in emerging churches brings back the worship that reflects the holism between mind and body.³⁰ There is no longer separation between mind and body in worship. Postmodern worship embraces the whole person, body and mind, as unity. Sacralization in worship also opens the way for the use of elements that used to be categorized as secular, such as secular music, movies, and literature.³¹

The last core characteristic of the emerging church is living as a community. As it has been mentioned earlier, life as a community is significant to emerging church.³² Communal lives are not about Sunday's meetings or other scheduled small-group programs. Rather, they are about "people, relationship, and movement."³³ Modernity image of church is very hierarchical. It is a program-oriented structured organization, always measured by numbers and size, and

29. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 78.

30. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 78.

31. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 34. Pagitt's Solomon's Porch also has some rituals that include the practices of yoga, massage, and physical prayer. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 78.

32. Pagitt, for instance, in his book, *Church Re-Imagined*, portrays the spiritual formation in Solomon's Porch that takes place in the community setting. See fn7.

33. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 34.

becomes a place where people come to satisfy their spiritual needs. In modernism, “Christians coming to the church instead of becoming church.”³⁴ Postmodernism views the church as beyond a static institution. The church is not merely a *place* to meet but is primarily *people*.³⁵ Emerging church seeks to establish a community that works, performing “the way of Jesus in every sphere of society.”³⁶ This ecclesiology of emerging church was derived from the New Testament, which shows that Jesus entrusted the mission to his followers, not to establish the church in the sense of a structured institution, but a community of believers that effectively brings the gospel to the world by serving to one another.

Preaching of the Emerging Church Leaders:

Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt

Having surveyed the definition and core characteristics of the emerging church, it is proper here to investigate the philosophy and method of preaching of two prominent leaders of the movement, that is Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt. Their preaching inevitably has been much influenced by the values of postmodernity they are embracing. Both McLaren and Pagitt have been labeled as *Revisionist*

34. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 35.

35. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 90.

36. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 89. Pagitt’s hope of the Solomon’s Porch community is that a spirituality of service “will be evident in a community not limited to supplemental small-group programs but valued as the cultivating force in which lives with God are the claim and invitation to Kingdom life.” See Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, 35.

within the streams of the emerging church movement.³⁷ *Revisionists* refer to those who while embracing the values of postmodernism, are “questioning key evangelical doctrines on theology and culture, wondering whether dogmas are appropriate for postmodern world.”³⁸

McLaren, for example, equates the gospel with the kingdom of God.³⁹ He views that the kingdom of God is the gospel and “repositioning, reintroducing, and reframing the gospel as synonymous with the kingdom of God has become McLaren’s

37. Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 46. Other types of emerging churches are *Relevants* and *Reconstructionists*. This categorization comes from the missiologist Ed Stetzer and it has been adopted by many in discussing the emerging church. See Ed Stetzer, “First-Person: Understanding the Emerging Church,” *Baptist Press*, accessed 27 November 2019, <http://www.bpnews.net/22406/firstperson-understanding-the-emerging-church>. *Relevants* are “theologically conservative evangelicals who are not as interested in reshaping theology as they are in updating worship styles, preaching technique and church leadership structures” (A good rendering in Belcher, *Deep Church*, 45). Belcher puts Mark Driscoll in this camp, though Driscoll himself preferred to be identified as “Relevant Reformed,” referring to his own reformed theological conviction (Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 39–40). *Reconstructionists* refer to those who are not satisfied with their present forms of church, yet they are still holding the orthodox view of the Scripture and the gospel (Stetzer, “First-Person”). Some key persons from this types are Neil Cole, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, George Barna, and Frank Viola (Belcher, *Deep Church*, 46).

38. Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 46. See also Stetzer, “First-Person.” Bohannon observes that the *Revisionists* hold loosely and made open to revision some orthodox evangelical teachings, such as substitutionary atonement, hell, gender, and the nature of the gospel (Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 39).

39. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 106.

ministry manifesto and continuous mantra.”⁴⁰ Salvation, therefore, is not about placing one’s faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Instead, it is “a summons to actively participate in God’s beautiful plan for humanity on earth.”⁴¹ For McLaren, the message of the kingdom of God is “not just a message *about* Jesus that focused on the afterlife, but rather the core message *of* Jesus that focused on personal, social, and global transformation in this life.”⁴² As a consequence, many of McLaren’s sermons emphasized the calling to live out a good life according to what Jesus had modeled, for the good of humanity.

Pagitt, exemplifying the character of *Revisionists*, deflates the notion of original sin and total depravity.⁴³ As a result, there will be no judgment over sin and God is not a kind of judge who will punish the sinners. Therefore, Jesus was not died to redeem the sinners from the slavery of sin. Rather, “Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection provides and pictures the promise of God to heal creation and to allow all humanity to live in partnership and love with Him.”⁴⁴ Pagitt’s gospel is the one with the message of “love, peace, and world harmony,”⁴⁵ stressing the building of humanity through the new life

40. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 68–69.

41. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 69.

42. Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: When the World’s Biggest Problems and Jesus’ Good News Collide* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 22.

43. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 91.

44. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 97.

45. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 97.

of Christians who are joining God in his kingdom works. Many of Pagitt's sermons, hence, are accentuating the importance of re-creation of a new kind of humanity.

Brian McLaren and Preaching

Since McLaren never wrote a book on preaching, his philosophy and method on preaching should be gleaned from other resources. One of the valuable resources to identify McLaren's beliefs in preaching is an interview by *Preaching* journal with McLaren which was published in a book along with the interviews with many other prominent preachers.⁴⁶ In this interview, McLaren confesses that his ministry has undergone a paradigm shift, from modern to postmodern. The way he sees humanity, gospel, and mission is now through the postmodern perspectives. Ministry and preaching in the postmodern era require new approaches to connect with the postmodern generation.⁴⁷

McLaren asserts that entering the postmodern world is "reentering a world of mystery and reentering a world where people

46. Michael Dudit, ed., "Preaching to Postmoderns: An Interview with Brian MacLaren," in *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 115–30.

47. In McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 171–84, he shares fifteen things to do to maximize the opportunity in serving the postmodern people, among others are that "we need to see truth and goodness where they exist in postmodernism," "we need to be more experiential," "we need to listen to the postmoderns' stories and tell our stories," and "we must reassert the value of community and rekindle the experience of it."

are skeptical of those overblown claims to certainty."⁴⁸ Hence the absolute claim of truth is not appropriate to the postmodernism spirit. The preachers are not to proclaim their message with authority. Espousing postmodernism's values of skepticism and suspicion, McLaren believes that preaching aims to convey "'a message that is clear yet mysterious, simple yet mysterious,' and 'substantial yet mysterious.'"⁴⁹ This is a challenge to preachers in a modern posture, who used to proclaim their messages with certainty and knowledge. McLaren looks for "a more ancient view of spiritual leader as people who guide others into mystery."⁵⁰

McLaren also emphasizes preaching as conversation or dialogue.⁵¹ Preaching in modern *ethos* has been analytical, following the rigid rule of responsible exegesis: take a text and then analyze the context, words, structure, etc., and then make some points from the analysis. Modern preaching turned out to be propositional preaching. McLaren urges for a more "collaborative process, where preaching seeks to influence through dialogue, honesty, and humility, rather than by argument or control."⁵² McLaren admits that his preaching in

48. Duidit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 117. The only thing that the people with postmodern thinking are certain about is that "they are certain that they can't be certain about anything" (Duidit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 117).

49. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 72; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 89.

50. Duidit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 117.

51. Duidit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 119.

52. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 74. In the issue of religious pluralism, facing people from other religions and trying to make

the past was heavily analytical, but then when his preaching “mirrors the flow of conversation,” he can connect to more people.⁵³

Another philosophy of preaching held by McLaren is community and experience. One of the things that the church can do to maximize the opportunity in serving the postmodern world is to “reassert the value of community and rekindle the experience of it.”⁵⁴ McLaren, agreeing with Leslie Newbigin, believes that the best apologetic for gospel is but a community that lives the gospel, showing genuine love for one another.⁵⁵ He argues that in postmodernity one cannot view the gospel as a “disembodied message” any longer; it is “a message embodied in a community.”⁵⁶ Community to McLaren is an antidote to modernistic individualism. The aim of postmodernistic preaching is not to bring an individual to heaven, but to make the message of the gospel, i.e. the way of Jesus, alive in the community. McLaren’s preaching goal, therefore, is to get people “to the framework of Jesus, believing that understanding comes from a result of trying and obeying,” thus emphasizing experience.⁵⁷ The way to lead people to understand the gospel is by

them understand about Jesus, McLaren advises to move to “much more conversational and friendly mode of discourse about religion” rather than doing a head-to-head argument, Christianity versus other religions. See Dudit, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” 122-23.

53. Dudit, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” 119.

54. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 183–84.

55. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 184.

56. Dudit, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” 123.

57. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 75.

helping them to get the “combination of understanding and experience and experimentation.”⁵⁸

Regarding the preaching method, like other emerging church preachers, McLaren heightens the importance of narrative. He encourages preachers to reshape the sermon into a more narrative format. His main model is Jesus himself, whose teaching and preaching method was mainly narrative. McLaren believes that in a postmodern world people have more confidence in “truth residing in stories such as parables than just in isolated, technical words.”⁵⁹ He explains that his own preaching will develop around a larger story—“the story of how I am struggling with something in my own life, the story of how the Christian community as a whole is struggling with something.”⁶⁰ For McLaren, narrative preaching also honors context. Since God has revealed his purpose and plan in the Bible mostly in story, then narrative framework is the most appropriate tool to convey the message of the Bible.⁶¹

One example of McLaren’s sermon that illustrates the emerging church’s spirit is a sermon preached at a Calvary Episcopal Church on March 19, 2019.⁶² The text was from Luke 16:1-9, the parable of the dishonest manager. McLaren communicates the message in narrative form, retelling the parable with an interesting

58. Dudit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 119.

59. Dudit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 126.

60. Dudit, "Preaching to Postmoderns," 126-27.

61. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 79–80.

62. "Dr. Brian McLaren: March 19, 2019 - YouTube," accessed 21 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3G7zW6RW-Dw>.

explanation of the nature of the job of the manager. The parable is supposed to be a teaching on how Christ's disciples should view money and possessions in light of the life to come where they will be entrusted with real wealth. The message is indeed very gospel-centered, reminding one to wholeheartedly worshiping God in Christ in the face of the lure to be satisfied by one's wealth. McLaren, however, has a different message from the text.

According to McLaren, through the parable, "Jesus is telling people how to be ethical people in the middle of an unjust system." The manager in the parable, when realizing that the way he made a living would not last forever, made a critical decision: "I'm gonna see my future not with the richest of the rich, but with the poor." McLaren calls for repentance; people should seriously consider how to live in an unjust and exploited economy. "Jesus is telling you that it's time to switch side in this unjust of economy and stop worrying about working for the rich." "Caring for the last, the least, the lost, and the marginalized" is what Jesus called believers to do. McLaren's message exhibited his concern on how Jesus' followers should live in this kingdom of God on earth. He did not relate at all his message with the life to come, despite it is the main thrust of the passage. It was all about life on earth, how believers can participate in God's plan for humanity on earth. The stress was not on the afterlife, but rather focused on "personal, social, and global transformation in this life."⁶³

63. McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 22.

Doug Pagitt and Preaching

Pagitt reveals his viewpoint of preaching in his book, *Preaching Re-Imagined*.⁶⁴ He sets his preaching as a protest to the modern or traditional way of preaching, which he calls “speaching.” “Speaching” is a one-way monologue type of preaching and Pagitt deems it to be “an ineffectual means of communication” and “creates a sense of powerlessness” in the hearers.⁶⁵ Speaching characterizes modern view of preaching, putting the preacher in a position of authority and the hearers have no option but to receive the message as the truth they should hold on to. Pagitt’s lament on speaching is that it “tends to be arrogant, manipulates emotions and controls outcomes of belief, dehumanizes people and makes them passive, hurts the developments of healthy community, and removes the pastor from the congregation in his preparation and sets him up as the only expert.”⁶⁶ It is obvious the spirit of anti-authority, which is the important feature of postmodernity, typifies Pagitt’s understanding of preaching.

The main problem of speaching, according to Pagitt, is that it completely disregards the Christian community.⁶⁷ In Pagitt’s view of preaching, community should play the main role in determining the content of preaching. Solomon’s Porch of Pagitt adopts a view of

64. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

65. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 22.

66. Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 146.

67. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 22.

preaching called “relational-set hermeneutic,” meaning that “they have a hermeneutic of community where nothing is privileged, not even the Bible, over the community in discovering and living out truth.”⁶⁸ Pagitt believes that each member of the community has a right to give his/her voice in a preaching event. The last word should not come from the preacher (or “speaker”), but rather from the community.

To challenge speaking, Pagitt offers the type of preaching that provides a wide opportunity for the community to be involved in the process of making. He believes that God is uniquely at work in the life of every person of the community so that their voices and experiences are supposed to be heard as well. Pagitt, therefore, offers the solution to the speaking predicament, that is by doing “progressional dialogue,” where “the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and the listeners, and substantive changes in the content are then created as a result of this relationship.”⁶⁹ In the progressional dialogue, then, the multiple viewpoints of the community are

68. Belcher and Mouw, *Deep Church*, 145. See also Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 37. Pagitt’s low view of the Bible here is not surprising, since he does not hold that the Bible is authoritative over Christians. He asserts, “The Bible gains its authority from God and the communities who grant it authority,” implying the type of authority of the Bible that comes partly from God and partly from community (Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 89). The quotation is from Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing: Hope-Filled, Open-Armed, Alive-and-Well Faith for the Left Out, Left Behind, and Let Down in Us All* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 64.

69. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 23.

welcomed to be involved in the establishing of a sermon, even they are much appreciated because the dialogue will develop unexpected ideas. Pagitt's aim in progressional dialogue is to create a community of preachers, so the church "listen to the preacher among us, not just the preacher standing in front of us."⁷⁰

The "progressional dialogue" kind of preaching leads to the method of preaching that involves the community. The communal approach for the sermon and its delivery is done in two steps: (1) A Bible discussion group meets during the week to participate in the crafting of the sermon. (2) The weekly message is delivered as a roundtable discussion with a big-table feel.⁷¹ In this second step, the gathered community engages with the sermon during its delivery. In his community, Pagitt decentralizing himself as the holder of authority, for he believes that everybody in the community has the same right and privilege to speak about God.

One might ask, then, about the role of the preacher if he is not the sole source of the message in preaching. Bohannon appropriately summarizes the preacher's roles in progressional dialogue approach from *Preaching Re-Imagined* as follows:

- (1) The preacher has a responsibility to set the parameters for the sermonic conversation.
- (2) The preacher must present an appropriate posture for preaching, showing an attitude of

70. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 26. See also Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 103. Pagitt's new approach that emphasizes the community's role has the goal of "searching the stories of others to find permission to pursue their own deeply held, unspoken intuitions about how faith and church could be" (Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, 15).

71. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 104–5.

authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability. (3) Setting the right tone of voice. (4) Developing an art for improvisation, and (5) Ditching sermon notes, since preaching without notes encourages fluidity and openness of such participation.⁷²

The preacher's role here is more like that of a facilitator than of an authoritative preacher. All he has to do is to assure that each member of the community presents his/her authoritative voice in the sermon.

Conclusion

Being on the camp of *Revisionists* among the Emerging Church leaders, McLaren and Pagitt have shown themselves shifting quite far away from traditional theology stances. Both men "seem to prize the Bible more as mystery than knowable, propositional, eternal truth, about God and man."⁷³ This low view of the Bible affects their preaching philosophy, for they diminish the authority of the Scripture in their practices of preaching. The elevating of the community over the Bible betrays a misunderstanding of the significance of community in the Bible. In the Bible, the Christian community is a group of redeemed people who shall be the witness of Jesus Christ to the end of the world (Acts 1:8). Nowhere in the Bible shows that community is one of the sources of the truth. On the contrary, the redeemed people of Christ should always heed the word of God as

72. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 105–6.

73. Bohannon, *Preaching & The Emerging Church*, 171.

the only authority over their faith and behavior. Pagitt says, "The people of God, in communion with the Bible and the Holy Spirit, have the truth of God within them."⁷⁴ This implies that "truth is determined by an interaction of the people of God, the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁵ Viewing the community as having the ultimate authority to decide what is the truth exposes the ignorance of the sinful nature of human beings which might bring the community plunging into heresy.

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74. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 139.

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