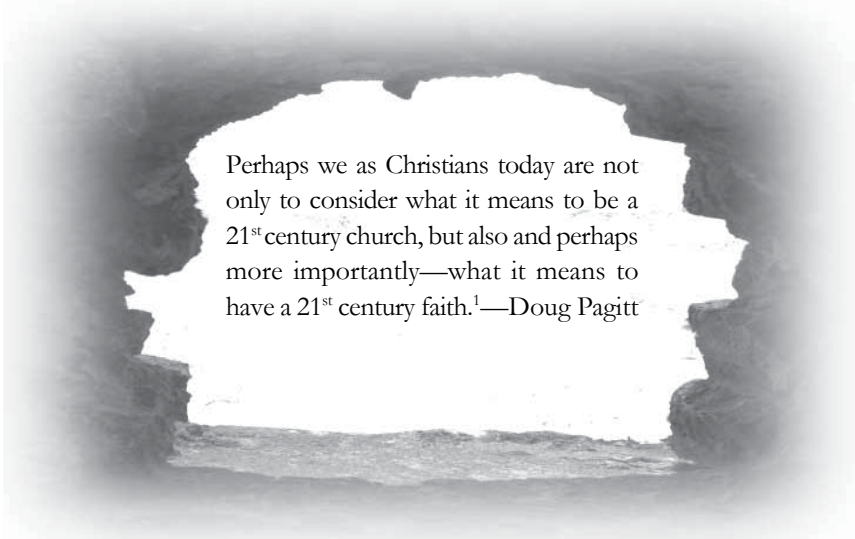


# 3

## A "New" Faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



Perhaps we as Christians today are not only to consider what it means to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century church, but also and perhaps more importantly—what it means to have a 21<sup>st</sup> century faith.<sup>1</sup>—Doug Pagitt

### THE PROCESS OF REIMAGINING

**E**mergent church leaders often provide testimonies explaining how they became involved in their *journey* to *reinvent* Christianity. In his book *Church Re-Imagined*, Doug Pagitt tells how and why his church originated:

Our attempt at being a church began in January 2000 in a small second-floor loft space in a hip little neighborhood of Minneapolis called Linden Hills. The church was actually birthed much earlier, from conversations between a few friends who shared a desire to be part of a community of faith that not only had a new way of functioning but also generated a different outcome. At that point I had said, on more than one occasion, that I didn't think I would be able to stay Christian in any useful sense over the next 50 years if I continued

with the expression of Christianity I was currently living—pretty disconcerting stuff for a pastor.<sup>2</sup>

Pagitt explains why he felt he needed to find a new expression of Christianity that was different from what he had been accustomed to previously. He states:

This was not a crisis of faith in the typical sense; I never doubted God, Jesus, or the Christian faith. And yet I had a deep sense, which has actually grown deeper since, that I needed to move into a Christianity that somehow fit better with the world I lived in, not an expression reconstituted from another time.<sup>3</sup>

Pagitt goes into more depth on how he views fitting “better with the world” he lives in:

We also understand ourselves as part of a global community. We are required to live our local expressions of Christianity in harmony with those around the world. The beliefs and practices of our Western church must never override or negate the equally valid and righteous expressions of faith lived by Christians around the world. It is essential that we recognize our own cultural version of Christianity and make ourselves open to the work of God’s hand in the global community of faith.<sup>4</sup>

Notice the emphasis on a “global community of faith” that permits all “expressions of faith” by anyone and everyone who claims to be Christian. As we are going to see, Pagitt bases his ideas of changing the profile of Christianity on an ecumenical view that permits beliefs and experiences not found in the Bible. Not only are they not found in the Bible, the plan can’t work with an intact Bible. In order for the emerging church to succeed, the Bible has to be looked at through entirely different glasses, and Christianity needs to be open to a new type of faith. Brian

McLaren calls this new faith a “generous orthodoxy.”<sup>5</sup> While such an orthodoxy allows a smorgasbord of ideas to be proclaimed in the name of Christ, many of these ideas are actually forbidden and rejected by Scripture.

Pagitt believes that he is part of a cutting-edge response to the new postmodern world. It’s a response he and others see as completely unique, never having been tried before in the history of man. Pagitt states:

It seems to me that our post-industrial times require us to ask new questions—questions that people 100 years ago would have never thought of asking. Could it be that our answers will move us to re-imagine the way of Christianity in our world? Perhaps we as Christians today are not only to consider what it means to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century church, but also and perhaps more importantly—what it means to have a 21<sup>st</sup> century faith.<sup>6</sup>

Many people I meet at conferences who come from a wide variety of church backgrounds tell me the church they have been attending for years has radically changed. Their pastor no longer teaches the Bible. Instead, the Sunday morning service is a skit or a series of stories. The Bible seems to have become the forbidden book. While there are pastors who do still teach the Bible, they are becoming the exception rather than the rule.

Emergent leaders often say the message remains the same, but our methods must change if we are going to be relevant to our generation. The measure of success for many pastors today is how many are coming, rather than how many are listening and obeying what God has said in His Word. Let’s consider how Doug Pagitt uses the Bible in his own church. He states:

At Solomon’s Porch, sermons are not primarily about my extracting truth from the Bible to apply to people’s lives. In many ways the sermon is less

a lecture or motivational speech than it is an act of poetry—of putting words around people’s experiences to allow them to find deeper connection in their lives... So our sermons are not lessons that precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation.<sup>7</sup>

What Pagitt is describing is a *contextual theology*; that is, don’t use the Bible as a means of theology or measuring rod of truth and standards by which to live; and rather than have the Bible mold the Christian’s life, let the Christian’s life mold the Bible. That’s what Pagitt calls “putting words around people’s experiences.” As this idea is developed, emerging proponents have to move away from Bible teachings and draw into a dialectic approach. That way, instead of just one person preaching truth or teaching biblical doctrine, everyone can have a say and thus come to a consensus of what the Bible *might* be saying. Pagitt explains:

To move beyond this passive approach to faith, we’ve tried to create a community that’s more like a potluck: people eat and they also bring something for others. Our belief is built when all of us engage our hopes, dreams, ideas and understandings with the story of God as it unfolds through history and through us.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

**Y**ou may not have heard the term before, but contextual theology is a prominent message from the emerging church. In his book, *Models of Contextual Theology* (1992), Stephen B. Bevans defines contextual theology as:

...a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle

for equality, justice and liberation.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the Bible in, and of itself, is not free-standing—other factors (culture, ethnicity, history) must be taken into consideration, and with those factors, the message of the Bible must be adjusted to fit. As one writer puts it, “Contextual theology aims at the humanization of theology.”<sup>10</sup> But two questions need to be asked. First, will the contextualizing of Scripture cause such a twisting of its truth that it no longer is the Word of God, and secondly, is Scripture ineffective without this contextualization? To the first, I give a resounding yes! And to the second, an absolute no. The Word of God, which is an inspired work of the living Creator, is far more than any human-inspired book and has been written in such a way that every human being, rich or poor, man or woman, intelligent or challenged will understand the meaning of the Gospel message if it is presented in their native language; and thanks to the tireless work of missionaries for centuries, the Gospel in native languages is becoming a reality in most cultures today.

Dean Flemming is a New Testament teacher at European Nazarene College in Germany and the author of *Contextualization in the New Testament*. In his book, he defends contextual theology:

Every church in every particular place and time must learn to do theology in a way that makes sense to its audience while challenging it at the deepest level. In fact, some of the *most promising* conversations about contextualization today (whether they are recognized as such or not) are coming from churches in the West that are discovering new ways of embodying the gospel for an emerging postmodern culture. (emphasis added)<sup>11</sup>

These “churches in the West” Flemming considers “most promising” are the emerging churches. He would agree with Bevans’ model of theology, but he has an answer to the emerging church’s dilemma. He states:

Many sincere Christians are still suspicious that

attempts to contextualize theology and Christian behavior will lead to the compromising of biblical truth . . . we must *look to the New Testament* for mentoring in the task of doing theology in our various settings.<sup>12</sup>

There's good reason some Christians are suspicious. But it can seem harmless at first because Flemming suggests the answer is in the New Testament, which he believes should be used as a prototype or pattern rather than something for doctrine or theology. New Testament theology is always open for change, he says, but we can learn how to develop this change by studying New Testament stories and characters. The premise Flemming presents of contextualizing Scripture is that since cultures and societies are always changing, the Word must change with it and be conformed to these changes. But I would challenge this. The Bible says the Word is living, active, and powerful:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

And if the Word is this powerful, then it is stable and eternal as well. God, in His magnificence, is the Author of Scripture, and He surpasses time, culture, and societies. Contextualizing says people and cultures change, and therefore God's Word must change. But, on the contrary, it's people who need to change to conform to Scripture. If we really believe that the Bible *is* God's Word, this would be clear to see; but if we think to ourselves that the Word is not infallible, not inspired, then contextualization would be the obvious expectation.

While certain parts of the Bible may be read as poetry (as Pagitt suggests), for indeed the Bible is a beautifully written masterpiece, it is also a living mechanism that is not to be altered—rather *it* alters the reader's heart and life. It is much more than putting words

around people's experiences as emergents suggest.

The Bible tells us God is always right; it is man who is so often wrong. When we rely upon human consensus, we will end up with man's perspective and not God's revelation. This is a dangerous way to develop one's spiritual life—the results can lead to terrible deception.

Brian McLaren put it well when he admitted it isn't just the way the message is presented that emerging church proponents want to change ... it's the message itself they are changing:

It has been fashionable among the innovative [emerging] pastors I know to say, "We're not changing the message; we're only changing the medium." This claim is probably less than honest ... in the new church we must realize how medium and message are intertwined. When we change the medium, the message that's received is changed, however subtly, as well. We might as well get beyond our naïveté or denial about this.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

If you listen to the emergent conversation long enough, you will hear a recurring theme: Christians are wrong to confront unbelievers head on with the Word of God. We should instead lay aside our desire to preach or share the truths from the Word and spend more time developing relationships and friendships with the unchurched (a politically correct name for unsaved). They often use Jesus as an example, saying He did not confront people but always accepted them for who they were.

One example is in Dan Kimball's 2007 book, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*. In his chapter titled "The Church Arrogantly Claims All Other Religions are Wrong," Kimball refers to the story where Jesus is sitting near a well by Himself (the disciples have gone to the nearby town), and he talks to a Samaritan woman. Kimball alters the story by saying:

He [Jesus] stopped and asked questions of the

Samaritan woman (John 4) and didn't just jump in and say, "Samaritans are all wrong."<sup>14</sup>

But Kimball is wrong. Jesus did the exact opposite! He didn't ask her *any* questions, and He confronted her straight on—something Kimball says (throughout his book) is a terrible thing to do to an unbeliever. Listen to Jesus' words to the woman:

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

The woman saith unto him, I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things. Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he. (John 4:21-26)

Kimball largely bases his premise on the reasoning that Christians should not do or say anything that might offend unbelievers, even if that anything is truth and Scripture.

The fact is, Jesus *did* confront people with the truth, as did His disciples (as well as the Old Testament prophets). And why did He? He told the woman at the well the reason:

Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. (John 4:10)

There is no question about it, the Word of God is offensive



to the unbeliever just as I Corinthians 1:18 states:

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

And again in II Corinthians 2:15-16, when Paul explains the attitude he encountered when witnessing to unbelievers:

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.

If Paul had been adjusting (contextualizing) the Word of God to fit the culture and context of the lives of those he spoke to, he would not have said “the aroma of death leading to death.” He took the spiritual state of these people very seriously, and he had full confidence that God’s Word, unaltered and unchanged, could reach into the heart and soul of any person who would receive Christ by faith. Whether a person is young, mentally challenged, or of a different culture or ethnic group, the Gospel is *God’s* Gospel, and He made it so that all who receive it by faith will understand His love and forgiveness and have eternal life.

#### THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

**W**ill Sampson is part of an emergent community in Kentucky called Community. He also serves on the Coordinating Group of Emergent Village.\* In *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Sampson writes:

A rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation was sola

---

\*Emergent Village is the group that formed out of the Young Leaders Network. The organizations website, [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com), is a strong and influential presence on the Internet.

scriptura, or Scripture alone. And while this doctrine may have arisen as a necessary corrective to abuses of church leadership in the Reformation period, it is in full effect today. Preachers speak of the Bible as an instruction book or as the only data necessary for spiritual living. But this diminishes some critical elements of theological knowledge. . . . Sola scriptura also tends to downplay the role of God's Spirit in shaping the direction of the church.<sup>15</sup>

Sampson says that people who fall into this category “do not take into account the subjectivity of human interpreters.” In other words, those men who penned Scripture may not have been that inspired after all. It could have been more a case of their point of view based on their own life experiences. Sampson adds:

Contextual theology is rooted in the notion that God's kingdom is vast and diverse, and it is our task as followers of Jesus to understand the diversity of God's work in the world and join that effort.<sup>16</sup>

Translated, that means we must not limit ourselves to Scripture but see God *out of the box*, so to speak. Sampson says that too many “Westerners” look at God scientifically and rationally, and this is a problem for the emerging church mindset. He explains:

Suggesting that God is doing something that may not conform to our previous understandings requires us to *think more broadly*. (emphasis added)<sup>17</sup>

But just how broadly does Sampson believe we should think? Would he suggest we veer from doctrinal truths of the Bible? The answer is yes. He says the “notion of being able to join the work of God simply through belief statements has had a negative impact on the health of the church.”<sup>18</sup> He adds:

[A]nother major delta in the church, the Protestant Reformation, the belief in justification by faith alone caused large parts of the church to split off from what was the global unified church.<sup>19</sup>

Sampson is implying that if it hadn't been for the reformers determination to stick to biblical doctrines, maybe this global unified church could have stayed intact. Sampson takes this line of reasoning a giant step further:

Some would argue that these splits were necessary to correct false understandings of what it means to be the people of God.... So if by our actions we say that being right is more important than being together, what does that say about the God who formed our communities or how that God wishes to interact with contemporary humanity?<sup>20</sup>

This theological shift is challenging the premise of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation, suggesting that unity and works is more important than the Gospel or justification by faith. Even Rick Warren is talking this way. Regarding what he calls a new reformation, Warren states:

I'm looking for a second reformation. The first reformation of the church 500 years ago was *about beliefs*. This one is going to be *about behavior*. The first one was *about creeds*. This one is going to be *about deeds*. It is not going to be about what does the church believe, but about what is the church doing. (emphasis added)<sup>21</sup>

A reformation that gives more credence to works and deeds than beliefs and doctrine is flawed right from the get go. With proper beliefs and doctrine, works and deeds will follow. But not so the other way around. Good deeds are not always an indication of true godliness as Scripture states:

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness. (II Corinthians 11:14-15)

#### WHEN THE WORD IS NOT HEARD

My grandmother had good advice for reading the Bible... Reading the Bible is like eating fish. Enjoy the meat that's easy to eat first; come back and work on the bones later if you're still hungry.—Brian McLaren.<sup>22</sup>

**B**efore the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation and during the period known as the Dark Ages, the Bible was known as the forbidden book. Thanks to the reformers and the sacrifices they made, the Bible was translated into the language of the common people. The light of God's Word began to shine into the darkness, and people were delivered from the control and corruption of the Catholic Church\* and the power of the pope and the priests. God's grace was revealed and people were saved and released from bondage. Once again, people could understand that salvation is a gift of God and that Jesus made the sacrifice once and for all when He died upon the cross.

The point I am making is simple: When leaders who profess to be Christian intentionally or unintentionally hide God's Word from people, the darkness this creates leads to a desire for spiritual encounters (experiences). In order to convince followers they are being spiritually fed by these Bible-depleted teachings, leaders implement all kinds of experience-based religious rituals and paraphernalia—thus, the reason that icons, candles, incense, liturgy, and the sacraments are deemed necessary for the emerging worship experience.

---

\*When this book uses the term "Catholic Church" it is referring to the sacraments, the practices, the church fathers and mystics, and all that encompasses what is known as the Roman Catholic Church.

Now, let's examine something that has happened at Doug Pagitt's church as the literal Word becomes less and less important. In his own words:

During a recent Life Development Forum we offered a session on Christian practices. In one of the four weeks we introduced the act of making the sign of the cross on ourselves. This gesture has become a very powerful experience for me. It is rich with meaning and history and is such a simple way to proclaim and pray my faith with my body. I hold the fingers on my right hand in the shape of a cross, my index finger lying over the top of my outstretched thumb. I use the Eastern Orthodox pattern of touching first head, then heart, then right lung followed by left. Others in the group follow the Roman Catholic practice with left before right.<sup>23</sup>

Powerful experiences similar to what occurred during the Dark Ages are taking the place of expository Bible teaching. This makes sense in light of what happens when the Bible becomes the *forbidden book*.

Pagitt's statement (at the beginning of this chapter) typifies one of the basic beliefs of the emerging church movement. In a zeal to *reach* this present generation, Christianity must change. This change requires the Word of God, the very foundation of the Christian faith, to be altered. There is simply no other way of interpreting Pagitt's statement.

However, Pagitt's proposal creates a problem. If faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17), a faith not based *on* the Word is not biblical faith and therefore cannot be the Christian faith.

While reaching today's generation for the cause of Christ is something we as Christians should all desire, we must remember Jesus Christ challenged us to follow Him and be obedient to His Word. Scripture commands us to "be not conformed

to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). But the emergents are leading followers in the opposite direction, teaching that the Word of God needs to be conformed to people and cultures instead of allowing it to conform lives through Jesus Christ. As we are about to see, reimagining Christianity allows a dangerous kind of freedom; like cutting the suspension ropes on a hot air balloon, the free fall may be exhilarating but the results catastrophic.

For more information on *Faith Undone*, [click here](#).

### Endnotes:

### 3/A “NEW” FAITH FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

1. Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 17, 19.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29.

5. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

6. Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, op. cit., pp. 17, 19.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

8. Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, op. cit., p. 167.

9. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, Seventh Printing, November 2000, <http://www.cca.org/hk/resources/ctc/ctc94-02/1.Yuzon.html>), p. 1.

10. Paul L. Lehmann, “Contextual Theology” (Theology Today, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1972, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1972/v29-1-editorial2.htm>).

11. Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

13. Brian McLaren, *Church on the Other Side*, op. cit., p. 68.

14. Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 167.

15. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), Will Sampson section, “The

End of Reinvention,” pp. 155-156.

16. Ibid., p. 157.

17. Ibid., p. 158.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 159.

20. Ibid.

21. Interview by David Kuo with Rick Warren, “Pastor Rick Warren of Purpose-Driven Life talks to Beliefnet about Africa” (Belief net.com, [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/177/story\\_17718.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/177/story_17718.html)).

22. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, op. cit., p. 22.

23. Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, op. cit., p. 102.