



Why Icons Cannot Preach the Gospel

By Bob DeWaay

Suppose that a person wants to become a missionary and bring the gospel to a tribe that had never heard it. But the person finds the process of preparation too long, difficult and expensive: years of language training, preparation to live in a primitive culture, raising financial support, etc. So the would-be missionary comes up with a brilliant idea—travel to a key place where the tribal members meet, sneak in at night, construct a huge cross, and leave the country without saying a word—and carries out the plan. The next day the entire tribe gathers to marvel at the cross and ponder where it came from and what it meant. Perhaps, in time, they would even come to relish the cross and see it as a sign from beyond their world.

This is the essence of the Emergent Church. The Emergent Church and others of the postmodern ilk disparage the ability of words and languages to communicate cross culturally. They hate definitions and they loathe boundaries. They love ambiguity and mystery, and they are devoted to openness. However, they miss the fact that ONLY words can communicate the truth of the gospel and unless prior teaching (using words) has assigned meaning to them, icons, symbols and images communicate nothing. Yet, Emergent leaders consider well defined words that describe Christian doctrine to be relics of “Enlightenment Rationalism.” Therefore, says Brian McLaren and others, “prose theologians” who write systematic theology are horribly misguided.

A nationally broadcast video of an Emergent church service showed young people writing their names on a wooden cross. Let us think about that. If they were previously told that the cross signifies the truth of the blood atonement; that God’s wrath was directed against our sins, that Jesus shed His blood to avert God’s wrath, and that if we repent and believe the gospel we will be saved from God’s wrath AND they know that the cross they are signing signifies these truths because they have been told that it does, THEN writing one’s name on the cross could be seen as agreeing to the terms of the gospel. But, having debated the pastor of the church in question, I know they were not told these things because the pastor never preaches on God’s wrath against sin and will not ever proclaim that the blood of Christ is necessary to avert that wrath. So those cross

signers have no clue what the cross really means. Unless they were told the significance of it somewhere else, they are merely experiencing an emotional sensation at a religious service.

The same goes for incense, abstract drawings, sounds, sensations, and the warm feeling of being in a community. None of these things has the power to describe the gospel as the only means of salvation. They give the illusion of meaning when no meaning has been communicated. Some of these may be associated with certain types of ancient Christian practices, but the lack of context and explanation gives them no more particular meaning than would Hindu or Buddhist symbols. This is precisely why Yoga and other eastern practices find their way into the Emergent church. Without precise doctrine drawn from the teachings of Scripture, all practices can mean everything or nothing, depending on the experience of the worshipper. They may feel closer to God but have no way of knowing if they actually are closer to God.

In Francis Schaeffer's day, the "new theology" that disparaged the ability of God to speak authoritatively, once for all, to humans through words chosen and inspired by God was called "neo-orthodoxy." This theology is very much the predecessor of the thinking described in Emergent writings. In fact the key difference that I can see is that neo-orthodoxy was the religious version of existential philosophy, filled as it was with angst and despair, while Emergent theology is the religious version of romanticism. In one case, since we cannot be sure what is true, we take a blind leap of faith hoping that somehow life might really have meaning and in the other, since we cannot know what is true, we imagine that God is going to undo entropy (they really make such outlandish claims) and the world is going to get better and better.

Both neo-orthodoxy and the Emergent church look to symbols to convey meaning. Schaefer wrote, "The secret of the strength of neo-orthodoxy is that these religious symbols with a connotation of personality give an illusion of meaning, and as a consequence it appears to be more optimistic than secular existentialism." Schaeffer continued his critique of this irrational thinking: "All the new theology and mysticism is nothing more than a faith contrary to rationality, deprived of content and incapable of communication. . . Rationality and faith are totally out of contact with each other" (*The God Who is There*, 58, 61). How amazingly applicable this is to the Emergent Church.

The smells, bells, feelings, sights and sounds that Emergent worshippers find religiously exhilarating, are devoid of meaning in as much as they are devoid of definition. Words are the gift of God to rational man (created in His image) that allow us to make distinctions and transfer our knowledge of categories to one another. Attacks against the reliability of words to convey meaning are attacks against God Himself who has spoken. When God wished to communicate His plan of salvation in the greatest way ever, He didn't send symbols, icons, or ambiguous religious experiences; He sent His Son into tangible human history, and He spoke! The Bible says, "*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world*" (**Hebrews 1:1, 2**).

Satan is always making the same challenge to God's Word that he made in the Garden—"Has God said." The Emergent answer is "not really—words are inadequate to convey religious meaning—our own interpretive grids makes us think we are communicating when we are not—we are not so naïve is to believe the correspondence theory of truth . . ." etc. etc. So forget about words and come experience God will all five senses. Like Eve did?

The tribal people with their new cross become accustomed to its existence and preserve it as a sign that something totally unexplainable happened in their midst. They incorporate it into their tribal religion. They grow to appreciate it. Sometimes they touch it to get a closer feel of its texture. Sometimes they meditate under it. But they never find out who Christ is, what He did, and what this means to them—because they never hear the words of the gospel.

"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." (**1Corinthians 1:21**)

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