



Pragmatism & The Modern Church

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What is pragmatism?:

Pragmatism says that results prove truth; or in the Christian context, *if it gets results, it works and must be of the Holy Spirit*. Pragmatism essentially derives conclusions based on results, no matter how subjective the results are.

History:

John Dewey (1859-1952) is considered to be one of the founders of the philosophy of pragmatism. He believed experimentation was the arbitrator of truth. His theories laid the foundation for men like Richard Rorty (1931-2007) who is considered one of the originators of 'postmodernism'. These men and their philosophies taught there are no absolutes and we cannot know truth in any final sense.

Postmodernism came after the liberal movement which inflicted much damage on the church late in the 19th Century and early 20th Century. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), is considered the father of theological liberalism. From that time onwards nearly all major doctrines were challenged by liberal theologians, many who were involved in German Rationalism and 'Higher Criticism' which reduced the 'inspiration' of the Bible to a more 'human' level. The consequences of this can still be seen in the modern church where today life and experience (orthopraxy) have increasingly become more important than matters of belief (orthodoxy/doctrine).

Although it is true that doctrine must produce life, *life must also be founded in doctrine*. Today doctrine has been minimised to the extent that it is no longer essential...and the result?...*it is therefore no longer essential to counter false teaching*. Today the liberal movement is disguised as the 'Emergent Movement' with leaders like Brian McLaren who reject words such as authority, inerrancy and infallibility as unnecessary and distracting. McLaren has gone so far as to state: *'I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many circumstances to help people to become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts'*.

Pragmatism in Modern Christianity:

Today many churches will use almost any programme available to accomplish their 'goals'. It does not matter what the methods are, so long as they bring 'results'. The methods apparently do not affect the message. 'If it works it must be of God' and the outward blessing of God becomes the criterion by which they often measure the approval of God. But Proverbs 14:12 says: *'There is a way which seems right unto a man, but its end thereof is the way of death'*.

Pragmatism by nature is ecumenical. It will draw in others of different doctrines and faiths to achieve its end. Modern pragmatism does not like the doctrine of separation. Yet Psalm 1:1 says: *'Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law does he meditate day and night'*. Pragmatism replaces this with man's own counsel because it gets 'results' and is his 'experience'.

The Cambridge Declaration in 1996 called for churches to return to the Reformation roots of evangelism. Eighty theologians, pastors and church leaders signed a declaration at the conclusion of a four day summit held by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Westminster's Robert Godfrey noted: *'If we evaluate the pragmatism of the pragmatists on a pragmatic basis, we have to say that by their own standards they have failed. Why don't American medical statistics reflect the healings of the Charismatics? Why don't our crime statistics reflect the holy living of evangelicals? Why, after a generation of church growth methodology and user friendly worship, is church attendance down significantly?'* The Cambridge Declaration condemned 'the church growth movement' for allegedly stressing *'that a sociological understanding of those in the pew is as important to the success of the Gospel as is the Biblical truth which is proclaimed'*.

The above declaration largely fell on deaf ears. Churches today increasingly settle for 'what works' and are not overly concerned with truth. Postmodernists and pragmatists believe that we can never be certain of truth - this is the cry of the recent 'Emergent Church' movement. However, Christianity is a reasonable faith and the study of the meaning of the writings of the Bible can be analysed and

systemised. A criticism of this is that intellectualism and a focus on doctrine removes the life and the wonder of God. But this, although a possibility, does not have to be so. The great leaders of the past such as Jonathan Edwards, Spurgeon and the Puritans, were intellectual men with great minds of learning. The greatest revivals in history occurred under their teaching. Jonathan Edwards in particular is believed by many to have had a mind equal to Einstein. One only needs to read his journals and diaries to see his ‘intellectualism’ and his enormous capacity to think through deep issues.(1) His life and that of other Reformers often played out in a heart-felt experiential faith that burned to see people come to truth and believe in the risen Christ.

In contrast, ‘Emergent Church’ leader Brian McLaren writes: ‘*We place less emphasis on whose lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology are right and more emphasis on whose actions, service, outreach, kindness, and effectiveness are good*’.(2) This might sound like good advice but it is subtle error. It puts the cart before the horse. It is sound doctrine that brings forth ‘actions’. The root of faith and what is ‘right’ brings forth the fruit of works. Sanctification follows Justification, not visa versa. Emergent pastor, Rob Bell, concurs with McLaren’s emphasis: ‘*Perhaps a better question than who’s right, is who’s living rightly?*’ But does this include Buddhists? In some areas of morality they live better lives than many Christians! But is there no vital connection between what we *believe* and how we live, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy? If McLaren and Bell are correct, than ‘His Holiness the Dalai Lama’ will have more to offer us. But without sound doctrine and what is ‘right’, we don’t get forgiveness of sin, the imputed righteousness of God and eternal life!

The pragmatic philosophies of the modern church movements are subtly watering down the word of God. They compromise absolutes, please men and cater for the world.

Pragmatism in evangelism:

Today a ‘Christian’ is anyone who ‘believes in Jesus’. That includes many Roman Catholics. It included myself when I was a devout Roman Catholic and *before* I was Born Again, because I too ‘believed in Jesus’! It also includes many cult groups and other religions.

Pragmatism says that larger numbers of people in any one church are often considered a blessing from God. Whatever it takes to get these numbers justifies the means. Thus evangelistic enterprises become the foundation for church unity, in spite of the doctrinal differences in *essential* areas.

It is no secret that modern western evangelistic crusades have at least an '80% fall away rate'. The answer given by those who would defend such endeavours is that we should praise God for the 'success' of those few that are saved. Pragmatism says *if it gets results it works and must be of the Holy Spirit*. However, the real test for such logic is to *push the premise to its limit*. In other words, do we support a satanist camp if someone gets saved from it? I personally was saved while still in the Charismatic Catholic Church - does that mean that the Catholic Church is Biblical and we should support it or join with it? This is the answer to the pragmatists - to extend the logic to its conclusion so as to expose the unseen error. The cult groups also use such false pragmatism and they arguably have better 'results' (numbers) in evangelism than Christians!

Another danger of pragmatism in evangelism is the blindness to the 'hidden' results. My first reaction now to mass evangelism and modern crusades is: are they really being saved and what about the 80% that 'backslide'? Why do we not care about the 80% of whom many have been told they are on their way to heaven, yet they will hear those terrible words of Jesus: ***'I never knew you; depart from me you that work iniquity'***, (Matt.7:21-23). It's the stuff of nightmares and it should make the leaders of mass crusades shudder and examine the *methods* and the *message*!

When my children and I were once involved in *Youth Alive*, I often ignored this 'hidden result' of the 80% fall away rate until I questioned the worldly presentation, the lifestyle of the leaders, the carnality, the fleshly display of the music, the 'Christian rock' bands, the ecstatic worship that appealed to the flesh, and especially the hyped up 'decisions'. Years later I looked closely at some of those who had made 'decisions' for Christ and found almost all had 'backslidden' and gone back into the world and some were actually hardened to the Gospel.

In many of the crusades today, unbelievers are told that if they ‘invite Jesus into their hearts’, ‘accept Him as personal Saviour’, walk the aisle or say a ‘sinners prayer’ that they will be ‘saved’. Should we praise God for those few sovereignly saved through such ‘easy believism’, yet not ask why the *majority* fell away? If I fed poison to 1,000 people and some survived, would that make the poison worth it?

Modern mass evangelism produces quick and deceptively convincing results. The founders of evangelistic literature, the Puritans, differed greatly in their methods from modern Evangelism. They did not devise methods designed to attract the godless. They used no entertainment and did not try to sell the church to the disinterested. They rather were motivated by, and well aware of, the power of Scripture. They knew the truth of Acts 2:42,47: ***‘And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved’***.

Western evangelism is also fast becoming a ‘love joy peace’ Gospel that fails to preach sin and the law and its consequences. To this are added attractions to make the Gospel more palatable to the unsaved. These include the emphasis on making a ‘decision’, aisle-walking, gimmicks, and emotional manipulation (often through music). The result is a mixed and impure message.

Conclusion:

Pastor John MacArthur writes: *‘It is foolish to think that one can be both pragmatic and Biblical. The pragmatist wants to know what works now. The Biblical thinker cares only about what the Bible mandates. The two philosophies oppose each other at the most basic level.’* (3)

Charles Spurgeon prophetically warned of the dangers of pragmatism more than 100 years ago: *‘There are certain ministers, who are treacherously betraying our holy religion under pretence of adapting it to this progressive age. The new plan is to assimilate the church to the world, and so include a larger area within its bounds. By semi dramatic performances they make houses of prayer to approximate to the theatre, they turn their services into musical*

displays, and their sermons into political harangues or philosophical essays; in fact they exchange the temple for a theatre and turn the ministers of God into actors, whose business it is to amuse men...Ah me! The hedges are broken down, the walls are levelled, and to many there is henceforth, no church except as a portion of the world...This then is the proposal. In order to win the world, the Lord Jesus must conform himself, his people, and his word to the world. I will not dwell any longer on so loathsome a proposal...The Israelites were bad enough, but it was the mixed multitude that always led the way in murmuring. Why is there spiritual death today? Why is false doctrine so rampant in the churches? It is because we have ungodly people in the church and in the ministry. Eagerness for the numbers, and especially eagerness to include respectable people, has adulterated many churches and made them lax in doctrine and practice, and fond of silly amusements...

I have long worked out before your very eyes the experiment of the unaided attractiveness of the gospel of Jesus. Our service is severely plain... I have set before you these many years, nothing but Christ crucified and the simplicity of the gospel, yet where will you find such a crowd as this gathered together this morning? Where will you find such a multitude as this meeting Sabbath after Sabbath, for five and thirty years? I have shown you nothing but the cross, the cross without the flowers of oratory, the cross without the blue lights of superstition or excitement, the cross without diamonds of ecclesiastical rank, the cross without the buttresses of a boastful science. It is abundantly sufficient to attract men first to itself, and afterwards to eternal life! In this house we have proved successfully, these many years, this great truth, that the gospel plainly preached will gain an audience, convert sinners, and build up and sustain a church.

There is no need to go down to Egypt for help. To invite the devil to help Christ is shameful...' *

- (1) *'The Works of Jonathan Edwards'* (two volumes), Banner of Truth.
- (2) *'A Generous Orthodoxy'* by Brian McLaren
- (3) *'Ashamed of the Gospel'* by John MacArthur, P.80

* The issue of Pragmatism and Spurgeon's warnings are documented in *'Does the Truth Matter Any More'* by John MacArthur (two DVD's) available from this ministry.

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.