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## What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part Two

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The Emerging Church Movement includes an expanding number of leaders and a diversity of representations. For some, the movement appears to be something of a generational phenomenon—a way for younger evangelicals to reshape evangelical identity and relate to their own culture. For others, the connection with the Emerging Church Movement seems to be a matter of mood rather than methodology or theory. Elements of worship, aesthetics, and cultural iconography common to the Emerging Church Movement have been embraced by a cohort of younger evangelicals, who nonetheless hold to the indispensability of propositional truth. Nevertheless, for most Emerging Church leaders, the movement appears to be an avenue for reshaping Christianity in a new mold.

The philosophical maneuvers borrowed from postmodern theory provide a mechanism for transcending the defensive posture against Enlightenment criticism that mainstream Christianity has had to assume for most of the last 300 years. By denying that truth is propositional, Emerging Church theorists avoid and renounce any responsibility to defend many of the doctrines long considered essential to the Christian faith.

In *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D. A. Carson attempts to measure the Emerging Church Movement on its own terms—and then offers a critical analysis of the movement from a larger perspective.

When Emerging Church leaders point to a massive cultural shift in Western societies, they are not seeing an illusion. As Carson acknowledges, “The Emerging Church Movement honestly tries to read the culture in which we find ourselves and to think through the implications of such a reading for our witness, our grasp of theology, our churchmanship, even our self-understanding.” Something remarkable *has* occurred in the culture, and Emerging Church leaders certainly have a point in criticizing mainstream evangelicalism for missing this crucial fact.

Emerging Church leaders focus most of their negative criticism on what they identify as modernist thinking. The mainstream evangelical movement is criticized for having succumbed to the temptation to accept modernity’s limitation of truth to propositions, and therefore also the responsibility to defend those propositions against Enlightenment-based attacks. Emerging Church theorists dismiss what they identify as “foundationalist” thinking among conservative evangelicals, and feel themselves to be liberated from foundationalist assumptions insofar as they redefine truth in terms of narrative, communal understanding, and epistemological humility.

Yet, as Carson accurately levels his criticism, Emerging Church leaders demonstrate an incredible naiveté about the nature of postmodernism. As Carson summarizes, “The postmodern ethos tends to be anti-absolutist, suspicious of truth claims, and wide open to relativism. It tends to adopt therapeutic approaches to spirituality, and—whether despite the individualism of the Western heritage or perhaps even because of it—it is often attracted to communitarian wholeness.”

Emerging Church leaders, influenced by postmodern theory, rightly understand that every individual is deeply embedded in a social location. They are certainly correct in accusing much of mainstream evangelicalism from missing this point entirely—blissfully unaware of how the ambient culture has influenced our own ways of thinking. But does an

acknowledgement of the role of social location relativize the meaning of a text?

Carson, a capable and insightful critic of postmodernism, acknowledges that the postmodern approach has been effective in exposing the weaknesses of some forms of modernism. Furthermore, Carson also credits postmodernism with encouraging us to be “open to thinking about nonlinear and methodologically unrigorous factors in human knowing.” In addition, even as the modern age was characterized by embarrassing claims of cultural superiority, postmodernism has insisted on sensitivity to the diversity of cultures found in the global context.

Carson also credits postmodernism with the affirmation that human knowledge is always marked by finitude. “We get things wrong not only because we are not omniscient,” Carson admits, “but also because we are corrupt, morally blind, painfully selfish, and given to excuses in self-justification.”

Where does all this lead us? As Carson understands, a necessary and appropriate critique of evangelical habits of thinking—including unhealthy influences from modernist thinking—should be welcomed by serious-minded evangelicals. Yet, “Once we have acknowledged the unavoidable finiteness of all human knowers, the cultural diversity of the human race, the diversity of factors that go into human knowing, and even the evil that lurks in the human breast and easily perverts claims of knowledge into totalitarian control and lust for power—once we have acknowledged these things, is there any way left for us to talk about knowing what is true or objectively real? Hard postmodernists insist there is not. And that’s the problem.”

At this point, Carson levels his guns at the most extreme and irresponsible forms of postmodern thinking. He accuses postmodern theorists of channeling the discussion into “a manipulative antithesis” between an arrogant claim to possess full and omniscient knowledge and a radical and dishonest humility that claims that truth is fundamentally unknowable.

Beyond this, the “hard” postmodernists also fail to acknowledge that, even as language is complex and communication is uneven, some degree of communication does take place. A deep inconsistency in postmodern thinking is apparent when radical postmodernists write books, give speeches, or engage in conversation. If the communication of truth is as ambiguous, awkward, and uneven as the postmodernists argue, why write books?

While all thinkers fall prey to the trap of inconsistency, the postmodernists seem to embrace inconsistency as an intellectual virtue. As Carson suggests, even as they suggest that all scientific knowledge is produced by a process of social construction, “apparently they exclude their own knowledge of this analysis from a similar charge.”

In the end, Carson’s presentation and criticism of postmodernism sets the stage for his most focused analysis of the Emerging Church. He acknowledges that many, if not all, of the Emerging Church leaders appear to be driven by a genuine desire to reach persons either unreached or alienated from what they have understood to be the Christian Gospel. Nevertheless, Carson appears convinced that the Emerging Church Movement, as represented by its most influential founders and leaders, has embraced an understanding of Christianity that is inherently unstable, often sub-biblical, and dangerously evasive when it comes to matters of truth.

Carson’s book makes for mandatory reading—at least for all those who are concerned about the Emerging Church and the future of evangelical Christianity. He combines a charity of spirit with clarity of thought. If anything, Carson demonstrates an honest attempt to understand the Emerging Church Movement on its own terms. Yet, in the final analysis, Carson sounds an alarm.

After discussing at length the philosophical and cultural background to the Emerging Church Movement and after tracing the epistemological implications of the movement’s embrace of postmodern theory, Carson turns to doctrine.

At this point, Carson’s critique grows sharper and clearer. He considers the writings of Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke as representative of the movement and its doctrinal dangers. Carson’s most important and incisive criticism is focused on the question of Christ’s atonement and its meaning.

Given the fact that both McLaren and Chalke deny the substitutionary nature of the atonement—indeed, rejecting virtually any notion of penal substitution—Carson sees the ghost of a discredited theological liberalism. “I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the Gospel,” Carson laments. “Perhaps their rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove

willing to reconsider the published judgments on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the Gospel itself.”

Where are the other leaders of the Emerging Church on this question? I am constantly confronted by young pastors who identify themselves with the Emerging Church movement but deny that they associate themselves with the aberrant theological impulses and outright doctrinal denials that characterize the writings of the movement’s most well-known and influential leaders.

I completely agree with D. A. Carson when he reflects: “I would feel much less worried about the directions being taken by other Emerging Church leaders if these leaders would rise up and call McLaren and Chalke to account where they have clearly abandoned what the Bible actually says.”

There is a thin-skinned sensitivity on the part of many of those who identify with the Emerging Church. Even as they level severe and unflinching criticism at the inherited evangelical models, they recoil from criticism directed at their own proposals. The issues at stake in this controversy transcend sensitivities and are far too important to be sidelined in the name of uncritical acceptance. As always, truth remains the ultimate issue.

Carson puts this especially well: “The Gospel is deeply and unavoidably tied to truths, truths of various sorts. Our ability to know such truths (never exhaustively) and obey them turns on many factors: direct revelation from God (not least in matters concerning the nature and character of God), the illumination of the Spirit, and, for the ineluctable *historical* elements of the Gospel, on historical witnesses and the records they have left. And we increase such biblical faith by being crystal clear on the convincing nature of the evidence so graciously provided. Alternatively, the same presentation may simply repel some who hear us, precisely because it is truth itself that guarantees unbelief in the hearts and minds of some.”

Contemporary evangelicals face the responsibility, not only of becoming conversant with the Emerging Church, but of continuing a conversation about what this movement really represents and where its trajectory is likely to lead. Some of the best, brightest, and most sensitive and insightful individuals from the younger evangelical generation have been drawn to this movement. Undoubtedly, they have much to offer in terms of legitimate criticism of mainstream evangelicalism. The evangelical movement is far too immersed in pragmatism, experientialism, consumerism, and anti-intellectualism. Evangelicals seem only too eager to provide evidence of cultural isolationism and an eccentric grasp of cultural priorities.

Beyond all this, far too many evangelicals seem unconcerned about the absence of authentic ecclesiology—failing to see a vision of the church that is driven by the very missional and incarnational priorities that drive many within the Emerging Church Movement.

The real question is this: will the future leaders of the Emerging Church acknowledge that, while truth is always more than propositional, it is never less? Will they come to affirm that a core of non-negotiable doctrines constitutes a necessary set of boundaries to authentic Christian faith? Will they embrace an understanding of Christianity that reforms the evangelical movement without denying its virtues?

At the same time, the tables must be turned. Will evangelicals be willing to direct hard and honest critical analysis at our own cultural embeddedness, intellectual faults, and organizational hubris?

The Emerging Church and its leaders are right to insist that substance must be preferred to superficiality. We can only pray and hope that they will remember and acknowledge that substance requires a substantial and honest embrace of truth.

