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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PREACHING
IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PREACHING
IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

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To Sandy,
my wife, my best friend
and to
Kalah, Josh, and Seth,
always an encouraging family

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PREFACE

I could not have completed this work without the assistance of many people. Robert Vogel, my supervising professor, challenged me to assess preaching critically and consider the methodology that underlies the preached message. Professors Gregg Allison and Ted Cabal also provided keen insight and assistance in the areas of theology and philosophy.

The members of Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church have also been an incredible source of encouragement. They have walked with me through this journey and have shown great patience as their pastor spent many hours in the library doing research. Their prayer support has been an ongoing source of encouragement and has kept me going many times when it seemed I could not continue. The staff at Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church has also encouraged me by praying for me daily and listening to me ramble on concerning preaching in the emerging church.

Many others have provided support along the way. My parents have always given me encouragement and believed in my abilities. They have supported me in my doctoral work with their fervent prayers and their words of encouragement throughout. I have also received encouragement and support from fellow pastors who have prayed with me concerning this work and have listened patiently as I have shared my thoughts with them.

No one has inspired me more to complete this task than my wife, Sandy. No words can adequately express my thanks for her undying support and unending sacrifice. She endured relocation, loss of family time, and many stressful weeks, yet never wavered in her encouragement and support. When I felt like giving up, she was always there to encourage me and spur me on. She is the love of my life, and I am so grateful God has blessed me with such a wonderful lady.

Finally, I must acknowledge my amazement at the goodness of God. He and he alone enabled me to accomplish this task. My prayer is that this work will bring him honor and glory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Preaching the Word of God in an ever-changing culture has always been a challenging task. The present day is no exception. Shifts in western culture have moved us from a time where truth and authority of God's Word were the givens of society to an age in which both of these are now viewed with suspicion. The church must find a way to stand up and proclaim the truth of God's Word with one foot in the context of biblical times and one in today's postmodern culture.

These difficult challenges have led some church leaders to succumb to the postmodern culture by redefining truth and repositioning authority. Clements summarizes the postmodern culture, which is being catered to by many preachers today, when he writes,

Truth is increasingly regarded as something self-manufactured and provisional. Postmodernity rejects all tyrannical meta-narratives and offers instead the philosophical equivalent of LEGOLAND, in which everyone is free to gather whatever they like and build them into their own do-it yourself Disneytruth to play with.¹

This dissertation attempts to show that this redefinition of truth is what one all too often finds in the preaching of the emerging church. Furthermore, this dissertation addresses the way in which the issues of truth and authority are mishandled within the

¹Roy Clements, "Expository Preaching in a Postmodern World," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23, no. 2 (April 1999): 175.

preaching of the emerging church and why this is detrimental to today's listeners. In order to understand clearly the argument presented in this dissertation, one must first consider what is meant by the term "emerging church."

Emerging Church Defined

The emerging church is difficult to define since there is no single model that represents it. According to Kimball, the emerging church is more of a mindset than a model.² Those embracing this mindset understand that, if they are going to reach the emerging culture, then they must change their way of thinking about the church instead of simply utilizing different styles of ministry. Emerging churches believe they must measure their success, not by numbers, buildings, or budgets, but rather by what they are actually producing for the kingdom of God.³

Gibbs and Bolger give a perspective from within the emerging church, defining it in the following manner:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (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.⁴

This definition provides a positive description of the way in which the emerging churches seek to do ministry, emphasizing its missional mindset. Emerging churches seek to

²Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Churches: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 14.

³Ibid., 14-15.

⁴Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 43-45.

transform the world in which they live, not by merely believing a set of doctrines, but also by producing fruits of mercy and kindness to those in need.⁵

While noting the missional nature present in many of the emerging churches, Stetzer and Putnam warn that they, like many church expressions, are not uniform⁶ They make this observation:

The emerging church appears to have forked in three directions. One fork takes the same gospel in the historic form of church but seeks to make it understandable to emerging culture. A second stream takes the same gospel but focuses on questioning and reconstructing much of the form of the church. The third stream and more extreme approach focuses on questioning and revisioning the gospel and the church.⁷

Stetzer identifies these three streams as relevants, reconstructionists, and revisionists.

These three streams are analyzed in greater detail in chapter three. However, the primary intent of this dissertation concerns the revisionists.

The Present Situation

The revisionists' desire to change not only the methods of the church but also the message is an example of the anemic nature of much of the preaching in contemporary Christianity. Their hesitancy to mention the cross of Jesus Christ and their softening of key biblical doctrines are examples of how spirit-filled preaching has lapsed in revisionists' circles. John Piper laments the decline of faithful preaching, noting how preaching has conformed to the shape of contemporary culture:

No one would say today the same thing about preaching that we have seen in the “worship awakening”—namely, that there has been a great resurgence of God-

⁵Ibid., 42.

⁶Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking The Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 187.

⁷Ibid., 187-88.

centeredness, or a great moving of the spirit of God-wardness in the pulpit, or a focus on God's character and mighty acts in the preaching of evangelicalism. Rather, I think most would agree that preaching has moved in the other direction: relational, anecdotal, humorous, casual, laid-back, absorbed in human need, fixed on relational dynamics, heavily saturated with psychological categories, and wrapped up in strategies for emotional healing.⁸

While Piper was addressing a much broader range of issues than those present in the emerging church, the continued drift from God-centered preaching is just as obvious in much of what takes place among the revisionist preachers in the emerging church. For example, the message that Rob Bell is now offering is not the same old message delivered with a postmodern twist. Bell has emerged from what he perceived to be a stifling message of his evangelical training to something more mysterious and refreshing.⁹ His wife, Kristen, acknowledges that she and Rob had grown uncomfortable with church. The Bells started questioning their previously held beliefs about the Bible itself and maintain that they discovered the Bible as a human product, rather than a creative decree from God.¹⁰

Bell has emerged as one of the leaders of the emerging church. He has grown tired of traditional religion and is intent on helping others break free from its chains. Bell maintains that we need to “re-paint” and rediscover Christianity because the old model no longer works. He addresses this theme in his book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*.¹¹

⁸John Piper, “Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation,” *Trinity Journal* 16 (Spring 1995): 30.

⁹Andy Crouch, “Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 38.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

The move among revisionist leaders to repaint Christianity is influencing young evangelicals, who increasingly opt for this new twist on truth over traditional evangelicalism. Yaconelli reports the stories of several young key emerging church leaders who found their way out of the traditional evangelical setting into the emerging church culture.¹² The influence of revisionist leaders is also seen in Bell's *Everything is Spiritual Tour*, which has drawn thousands of young evangelicals to hear his message.¹³ Many are also in awe of his meeting with the Dalai Lama at the Seeds of Compassion Conference, where he sought to present a unified front with all religions. He did not, however, mention the gospel despite being presented with several opportunities.¹⁴

Another key leader, Brian McLaren, has been very successful in promoting his generous beliefs through his numerous books and speaking engagements. In his book, *Everything Must Change*, McLaren promotes a theology that focuses primarily on the protection of the earth while downplaying the salvation of the lost¹⁵ He provides a framework that gives people values, vision, and inspiration. This new framework supposedly gives them a better foundation than what is offered by traditional Christianity. McLaren writes that by adopting his framework of beliefs one can discover that he is not saved from an angry Father; instead, but accepted by a loving Father.¹⁶

¹²Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 27-32.

¹³Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual Tour* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 2007).

¹⁴Rob Bell was one of the featured personalities at the Seeds of Compassion Conference, April 11-15, 2008, Seattle, WA. This conference was a gathering of numerous faiths and religions attempting to unite them in service and ministry.

¹⁵Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville:Thomas Nelson, 2007), 5-6.

¹⁶Ibid.

The emergent views of Bell and McLaren are reflections of the postmodern mindset, which leads one to look within to pursue the sacred instead of looking to the transcendent God. Wells states,

They are not seeking the God of the Christian religion, who is transcendent, who speaks to life from outside out and entered it through the Incarnation, whose Word is absolute and enduring, and whose moral character defines the difference between Good and Evil forever. Rather, it is the god within, the god who is found within the self in whom the self is rooted.¹⁷

The dilemma this mindset creates within our culture is that those seeking God in this way do not begin with what God has revealed to us or with what is unchanging. Rather, they begin with the self, thereby giving themselves the authority to decide what to believe, where to gain knowledge from, and how to test the viability of what is believed.¹⁸ This shifting mindset has adversely affected the preaching and teaching in many revisionist churches. In an attempt to reach our changing society, they have developed their own form of hermeneutics, preaching, and theological methods.

Kaiser sees a direct correlation between a church's vitality and biblical preaching. He states, "The Church and the Scriptures stand or fall together. Either the Church will be nourished and strengthened by the bold proclamation of her Biblical texts or her health will be severely impaired."¹⁹ The problem with much of today's preaching in the emerging churches is that its methodology is not biblically sound. When Bell states that the church needs to "repaint" Christianity, he looks at the biblical text through the grid of culture rather than allowing Scripture to shape culture. For example, in *Velvet*

¹⁷David F. Wells, "The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 27.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 7.

Elvis, he uses an out-dated picture of Elvis Presley as a metaphor for old, out-dated ways of thinking about the Christian faith. The goal of the book is to repaint the Christian message in a way that is culturally relevant and meaningful today. Unfortunately, more times than not, Bell's repainting of the Christian message discolors the truth of the gospel. He likens the doctrines of Christianity to the springs on a trampoline, maintaining that they are useful but hardly essential.²⁰

A former emerging church leader, Mark Driscoll, takes a different view of doctrine, stating that emerging Christianity is making up its mind again on almost every major doctrinal issue.²¹ Driscoll notes that what began as a conversation among a few people is quickly escalating into a conflict between many people over eight very important theological issues. The issues that Driscoll sees as ultimately dividing them are Scripture, the doctrine of Jesus Christ, gender, the doctrine of sin, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of the atonement, the doctrine of hell, and the issue of authority of Scripture.²² These theological issues have become the battle ground between the revisionists and the traditional evangelical Christian. While many agree with the revisionists' understanding of the postmodern culture, the two groups part company as these key theological issues are articulated in very different ways.

²⁰Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 10-12. Although Bell contends that we need to repaint Christianity, Timothy Stoner offers a critique of Bell's methodology. See Timothy Stoner, *The God Who Smokes: Scandalous Meditations on Faith* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 41-51. Using Bell's metaphor, Stoner argues that not all paintings are as outdated as a Velvet Elvis. He contends that there are some Rembrandts in the Christian faith that do not need to be repainted, but need to be regarded as priceless.

²¹Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no.2 (Spring 2006): 91.

²²*Ibid.*, 91-92.

While these revisionist leaders are sincere in their attempt to reach the postmodern society, their methodology is flawed. One cannot reach this postmodern culture with the Christian gospel by adopting the characteristics that mark the identity of the postmoderns. The revisionists have studied today's society well. Unfortunately, they have accommodated the church to today's society.

Many of the revisionist leaders have also been hesitant to acknowledge the sole authority of Scripture. Instead, they look to the experiences of the worshiping community and church tradition for meaning. Grenz and Franke, for example, argue that the Spirit of God speaks equally through Scripture, tradition, and culture.²³ While they recognize Scripture as theology's "norming norm,"²⁴ they contend that it must be read in light of the tradition of the church and the present culture.

With the critical issues of truth and authority hanging in the balance, problems arise. Without a solid biblical foundation the sermons focus more on the felt needs of the community and their life experiences than conveying a powerful message from the Lord that is anchored in his authoritative Word. In fact, many leaders in the emerging church would cringe at the audacity of a preacher, who declares "Thus saith the Lord." Once the preacher redefines the truth of God's Word to coincide with life experiences and displaces the authority of God's Word with culture and tradition, he loses the power of the life-changing Word of God.

²³ Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 94. For more discussion concerning the three spheres of authority—Scripture, tradition, and culture—see Part 2 of *Beyond Foundationalism*, entitled, "Theology's Sources."

²⁴ This term is used by Grenz and Franke in *Beyond Foundationalism* to maintain Scripture as a valid source of authority in the working of their theology.

Much of the preaching of the revisionists in the emerging church acquiesces to the beliefs of the culture it finds itself in. Instead, it should heed the words of Paul: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). This dissertation demonstrates that the preaching of the revisionists is flawed and must change in order to reach our society with the truth of the gospel.

Thesis

The thesis of this dissertation shows that preaching in the revisionist stream of the emerging church redefines truth and displaces the authority of God’s Word. Some revisionist leaders in the emerging church are redefining preaching into a more holistic group experience as well as redesigning many of the principles of our Christian faith.²⁵ Biblical preaching must maintain a constant understanding that the Word of God is true. John MacArthur states, “A biblical perspective of truth also necessarily entails the recognition that ultimate truth is an objective reality. Truth exists outside of us and remains the same regardless of how we may perceive it. Truth by definition is as fixed and constant as God is immutable.”²⁶ This dissertation contends that the preaching of the revisionists redefines truth by allowing it to be determined by their hearers and their life experiences, rather than relying on the Word of God.

²⁵ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Pagitt has proposed a complete overhaul of preaching in this book. He contends that preaching is broken and borders on abuse when the preacher is the only one who is allowed to speak and the congregation must sit there and take it. See also Bell, *Velvet Elvis*. Bell is taking a similar approach with the time-honored doctrines of evangelical Christianity. In this book he argues that our beliefs must be fluid and elastic, not firm and unbending.

²⁶ John MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), xx.

Biblical preaching must acknowledge the sole authority of God's Word. Scripture cannot be recognized as merely one of many sources of authority; rather it must be proclaimed as the final authority in all matters of faith. The preacher must acknowledge the authority of Scripture because Jesus himself endorsed the authority of Scripture. "Jesus repeatedly endorsed the authority of the Old Testament by appealing to it and submitting to it. He also deliberately provided for the writing of the New Testament by appointing and equipping his apostles."²⁷ In this way, the Scriptures bear the stamp of the authority of Jesus Christ. In this dissertation, I argue that much of the preaching in the emerging church displaces the authority of God's Word with the authority of the community of faith. Since the postmodern mindset rejects authority, the emerging church allows everyone to become their own authority.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this dissertation is that revisionist preaching within the emerging church, impacts by the way they define truth and displace scriptural authority. How a preacher views truth and authority greatly affects the message he proclaims. For example, if he adopts the viewpoint of many within the emerging church, that there are no absolute truths, then the impact of the Bible on one's life is lessened. Scripture is viewed as one of three voices that are equally true. In a similar fashion, if he approaches the Bible with the understanding that it is simply one of many sources of authority it is no longer recognized as the sole authority.

²⁷ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity, & Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 59.

Truth is at the heart of postmodernism and the emerging church. Revisionist leaders in the emerging church are ardent in their rejection of propositional truth.

McLaren, for instance, rejects the traditional understanding of doctrinal statements. He argues that doctrines are useless if they are not backed up with love for one's neighbor.²⁸ Thus, according to McLaren, the doctrine's usefulness is not found in that it is given by God, but that its belief results in love for one's neighbor.

Once the issue of truth becomes murky, it is easy for one to lose sight of the proper authority. The clearest demonstration of the displacement of authority is the preaching ministry of Solomon's Porch. Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch, has boldly redefined preaching. According to Pagitt, preaching is broken and needs to be fixed. He presents a new method of preaching that he labels "progressional dialogue." Instead of the preacher proclaiming the Word of God to the congregation in a sermon format, Pagitt opts for more of a group dialogue. He explains,

I say something that causes another person to think something she hadn't thought before. In response she says something that causes a third person to make a comment he wouldn't have made without the benefit of the second person's statement. In turn I think of something I wouldn't have thought without hearing the comments made by the other two. So now we've all ended up in a place we couldn't have come to without the input we received from each other.²⁹

In Pagitt's model, everyone adds their ideas to the "sermon" and the thoughts and directions of the dialogue grow according to the contribution. One can readily see how the locus of authority quickly moves away from the biblical text and to the ideas and expressions of the gathered community, whether Christian or not.

²⁸Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 36. In my research I discovered there are multiple printings of this book with the same copyright date and publisher; however, the pagination is different. The book used throughout the course of this dissertation includes forewords by Phyllis Tickle and John R. Franke.

²⁹Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 23-24.

When truth and authority are compromised the entire biblical message is compromised. In progressional dialogue, truth is sought in each and every person gathered, and they also make up the source of authority. The authority of Scripture becomes a secondary issue, as Pagitt states, “Real progressional dialogue doesn’t necessarily mean a person needs to be converted to the other person’s view, but it does need to be an option.”³⁰ Pagitt ignores the fact that throughout the biblical text the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel is to persuade people to be saved, to proclaim the good news that leads to repentance and salvation.

Upon evaluation of the preaching and hermeneutics of revisionist leaders within the emerging church their tendency to redefine truth within their given communities is revealed. These preachers also display a considerable displacement of authority away from the biblical text and into the hands of the listening community. The critique of their sermons reveals whether these preachers turn to the Word of God to deal with the issues of life or whether they look into culture and seek to fit the text to the context of the times. Their preaching reveals their beliefs on key doctrines, where their authority lies, and whether they acknowledge the biblical text to be the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. Their sermons also reveal how they address determiners of truth.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

As with any study of this magnitude, one must keep the focus narrow. When it comes to the emerging church there is such a vast array of differing beliefs that one must choose a segment that best represents the movement. Accordingly, this study does not

³⁰Ibid., 199.

contend that the findings here are true of every emerging church. I have chosen to limit this study by focusing on the group that Ed Stetzer describes as “revisionists,” and by focusing on sermons and writings of several emerging church leaders, including Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Doug Pagitt, Tim Conder, Steve Chalke, and Spencer Burke. These key leaders not only desire to change the structure of the church, but they also revise what most evangelicals would understand as the gospel. Furthermore, these men are those whose writings and sermons are shaping the minds of young evangelicals.

I also focus on the postmodern influences on the emerging church. The postmodern culture is such a broad category that it is beyond the scope of this work to examine it thoroughly. Accordingly, this study focuses on those areas of postmodernism that directly influence the preaching, teaching, writing, and theological method of the aforementioned leaders. This study highlights the influence of postmodern hermeneutics on emerging church preaching, as well as the postmodern understandings of truth and authority.

Finally, I address the issue of truth. This study defines truth and then presents the biblical understanding of truth, while contending that truth is a property of sentences or propositions that correspond to reality. This argument is based on the reality that God is truth and the Word of God, which corresponds with the way things actually are is true.

Methodology

In critiquing the preaching of the emerging church, this study researches the theological and historical foundations of preaching, surveys the hermeneutics employed that impact revisionist preaching and analyzes the issues of truth and authority and their roles within the emerging church. To do this, I conduct an exegetical investigation of key

biblical terms and texts, combining theological analyses that historically have grounded preaching. Furthermore, I investigate several definitions of preaching from prominent evangelical preachers and compare these with the definitions of the revisionists.

The methodology employed in analyzing the emerging church is largely historical. I also conducted a theological analysis of its development in postmodern culture. I draw upon the literature that characterizes the movement. In additions to the revisionists, D. A. Carson, Ed Stetzer, and Dan Kimball provide some excellent sources for investigation. In dealing with truth, I present the definition and approaches to truth, while demonstrating the biblical basis for the understanding of truth. I show how the truth of Scripture corresponds to reality and then critique the revisionists' understanding of truth. I approach my investigation of authority by studying the biblical basis for authority, the displacement of authority within the emerging church, and the evangelical understanding of authority.

Finally, I address the issue of preaching in the emerging church by using nearly one hundred sermons from revisionist emerging church leaders. In order to further clarify the type of preaching taking place within the emerging church, I study Doug Pagitt's progressional dialogue as a model of emerging church preaching and then contrast revisionist preaching with the preaching of Mark Driscoll to demonstrate that one can preach in a postmodern culture and still have a solid foundation of truth and authority.

Conclusion

Emerging church leaders attempt to reach out to our changing culture, which

they contend has been neglected by traditional evangelical churches. They have done a good job of evaluating the mindset of today's culture and are to be commended for attempting to reach the culture in tangible ways. The emerging church also provides a renewed emphasis on missions and the need to interact with our culture and live out our faith. All of these are positive steps in seeking to contextualize the message the of Bible.

Although the emerging church has good intentions in reaching out to our changing culture, this study argues that their methodology of accomplishing this goal is fatally flawed. I contend that the revisionist preaching of the emerging church redefines truth and displaces authority. The study reveals that the governing norm for the emerging church revolves around the experiences of the community, their traditions, and their perception of truth. I demonstrate this through analyzing postmodern culture and its influence upon the emerging church, and by analyzing the writings, sermons, and theological methodologies of selected revisionist leaders.

In conclusion, I present a model of evangelical preaching that operates with the same intention of the emerging church. This model, however, anchors its message in the truth and authority of God's Word while still addressing the issue of an ever-changing culture. I present this model to demonstrate that one can proclaim the truth of God's Word to postmodern ears without compromising the truth or displacing the authority of God's Word.

CHAPTER 2

AN EXAMINATION OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF PREACHING

Definitions

In order to understand fully the argument presented here, one must first understand the meaning of the term “preaching.” John Broadus defines preaching as “the great appointed means of spreading good tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.”¹ Broadus here shows that preaching must be gospel-centered.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. addresses the issue of preaching by first giving a series of negations and affirmations. For example, he states that “preaching is not a human invention, but a gracious creation of God and a central part of His revealed will for the church. Thus preaching is communication, but it is not mere communication. It is human speech, but it is also much more than speech.”² Mohler references Ian Pitt-Wilson: “Preaching is not even ‘a kind of speech communication that happens to be about God.’ Its ground, its goal, and its glory are all located in the sovereign will of God. Preaching is therefore an inescapably theological act, for the preacher dares to speak of God and in a very real sense, for God.”³ For Mohler, God initiates and speaks through preaching,

¹John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (Philadelphia: Smith & English Co., 1870), 17.

²R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008), 39-40.

³*Ibid.*, 40.

making it more than mere communication; it becomes the voice of God to His people. Mohler is also careful to point out that God only speaks through preaching when one preaches biblically.⁴

Further, Mohler offers a definition of expository preaching:

Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible. All other issues and concerns are subordinated to the central task of presenting the biblical text. As the Word of God, the text of Scripture has the right to establish both the substance and structure of the sermon. Genuine expression takes place when the preacher sets forth the meaning and the message of the biblical text and makes clear how the Word of God establishes the identity and worldview of the church as the people of God.⁵

This definition describes the task of preaching as the presentation and application of the biblical text. Biblical preaching presupposes that God has spoken; therefore, the preacher must articulate what God has spoken and apply it in a way that establishes God as the authority.

John MacArthur offers another definition of expository preaching: “Expository preaching is preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented *entirely* and *exactly* as it was intended by God.”⁶ He also quotes Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Expository preaching is the proclamation of the truth of God as mediated through the preacher.”⁷ This definition, though brief, clearly articulates the belief that the message being proclaimed is one spoken by God and mediated through the preacher. Clearly the

⁴Ibid., 40.

⁵Ibid., 65.

⁶John MacArthur, Jr., “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition* (Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 23-24.

⁷D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 222, quoted by John McArthur, “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy,” 24.

Bible is the fulcrum of the message, not the opinions of the preacher. The authority of God's Word becomes primary. Since the message, when properly exegeted, conveys the Word of God, it has full authority in matters of faith and practice.

The issue of the authority of the Word of God is highlighted in Stott's definition of biblical preaching. He emphasizes that God has spoken in the inspired text, asserting that biblical preaching exists to "open the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and his people obey him."⁸ Stott's definition reiterates the belief that if God's voice is not heard when the preacher proclaims his message, then biblical preaching has not taken place. According to Stott, in true biblical preaching the preacher enters the pulpit with confidence that God has spoken and that he has inspired the biblical text, illuminated its truth, and will animate the hearers with the message.⁹ Biblical preaching is seen as authoritative because it comes from the very mouth of God.

One's understanding of biblical preaching would not be complete without the classic definition from Haddon Robinson. He defines expository preaching as follows: "Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."¹⁰

⁸John Stott, "A Definition of Biblical Preaching," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larsen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 24.

⁹Ibid., 25.

¹⁰Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2001), 21.

Robinson's definition focuses on the importance of getting at the author's original intent. He recognizes that the message proclaimed must be discovered from careful study of the biblical text. His definition also emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the mind of both the preacher and the hearers.

These definitions of preaching make it clear that the Bible drives the message. These definitions were chosen to establish the definition of biblical preaching because they approach the biblical text with the understanding that the task of preaching is to proclaim what the text says. The clearest expression of biblical preaching is expository preaching. The strength of expository preaching is that the shape of the biblical text determines the shape of the sermon. In this approach to biblical preaching, the preacher is simply proclaiming what is already present in the biblical text, thereby proclaiming what God has already spoken.

Biblical Basis of Preaching

The biblical basis of preaching can be determined by utilizing several approaches. The first approach is to look at some of the sermons in Acts and determine what characterized the preaching of the early church. The first sermon recorded in Acts is Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. This sermon was his response to the criticism that the manifestations of the Holy Spirit were actually caused by drunkenness (2:13). He refuted this charge with a prophecy from Joel and then began to proclaim Jesus to the crowds (vv.14-21). Peter's message was centered on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (vv. 22-38). The gospel message that Peter proclaims is one that is centered on the cross and the need of those listening to repent (vv.38-40). In the next chapter, Peter preaches after healing a lame beggar (Acts 3:12-26). Once again, his message is the same. The

gospel message centers on the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, was crucified, and rose again (v. 15). He closes once again with the urgent appeal for the crowds to repent (vv. 19-21). In another of Peter's sermons he again proclaims the same gospel message, namely, that Jesus was sent by God, he was crucified by evil men, and God raised him from the dead (Acts 4:8-12).

This same central focus is found in the preaching of Paul (Acts 13:16-41; 17:2-3; 1 Cor 1:23). His preaching is centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luke gives us some vital information concerning Paul's pattern of preaching: "And Paul went in [the synagogue], as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ'" (Acts 17:2-3). The Scriptures make it clear that preaching centers on the Christ-event.

A second approach is to engage in an investigation of analytical lexicons and words studies to better comprehend the meaning of the term, "preaching." Numerous biblical terms are associated with preaching. The Old Testament terms focus on what God said. The prophets of the Old Testament received a unique call from God and were expected to proclaim his words to his people. In the Old Testament, one of the terms translated "to preach" or "to proclaim" is the Hebrew word, רשב, meaning "to proclaim or declare."¹¹ This term is used in the messianic prophecies in Isaiah (Isa 52:7). When רשב is used in Isaiah 52:7 it is combined with the word, רשבמ, which means "messenger." In this context, the messenger is the one who announces the victory of Yahweh over the

¹¹Gerhard Kittel, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), s.v., "Κηρυσσω."

whole world. Kittel points out that the messenger is not announcing an event that will commence later, but rather an event that commences with the announcement.¹²

A further investigation of analytical lexicons and word studies reveals more than 30 different words used in the New Testament to refer to preaching.¹³ One of the words for preaching used more than 50 times is εὐαγγελίζω. This word refers to the preaching of the good news or the proclamation of the good news throughout the New Testament.¹⁴ Further study reveals that, when used in Paul's letters, εὐαγγέλιον refers to God's message of salvation through Jesus Christ. For Paul, the gospel consists of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Another biblical term used throughout the New Testament to refer to "preaching" is κηρυσσεῖν. According to Kittel, this term occurs 61 times in the New Testament. Our English equivalent for the term "preach" does not capture the full essence of κηρυσσεῖν. In the Greek, it does not mean the delivery of a studied manuscript in a trained voice, but rather the declaration of an event that has transpired.¹⁶ The task of the preacher, then, is to deliver the message God gives him without inserting any of his own opinions.¹⁷

¹²Ibid.

¹³Gerhard Kittel cites 31 New Testament words associated with preaching. See Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. "εὐαγγέλιον." See also Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *The Analytic Lexicon of The Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), s.v. "εὐαγγέλιον."

¹⁴John Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick, and James A. Swanson, *The Greek-English Concordance to the New Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), s.v. "εὐαγγέλιον."

¹⁵ Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "εὐαγγέλιον."

¹⁶Ibid., s.v. "κηρυσσω."

¹⁷Ibid.

The preaching revealed throughout the New Testament consists of a messenger proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The messenger proclaims the gospel just as it was received (Acts 2:22-36; 4:18-20; 7:1-52; 10:34-43). Such a description of preaching places the point of emphasis on the message, not the messenger.

Table 1 contains some of the key terms used for preaching in the New Testament. These terms do not comprise an exhaustive list. The findings reported in Table 1 demonstrate the strong emphasis on the act of proclamation.

Table 1. Selected New Testament terms for preaching

Terms	Meaning	Reference
κηρυσσω	preach, proclaim (appears in NT 61 times)	Matt 3:1; 4:17
κηρυγμα	preaching, proclamation of gospel	Matt 11:5; Luke 3:18
ευαγγελιζω	preach the gospel (appears in NT 34 times)	Matt 12:41; 1 Cor 1:21
επαγγελω	told, reported, proclaim	Matt 12:18; 28:10; Mark 5:19
μαρτυρεω	bear witness, testify	John 1:7; 1:15; 15:27; 19:35, 21:24
καταγγελω	announce, declare, make known	Acts 13:5; 15:36; 17:3; 1 Cor 9:14
λαλειν	speak, proclaim, preach	Luke 1:19; Acts 8:25; 9:29
διδασκειν	teach, instruct	Matt 5:7; 5:29; John 8:28

According to Stott, the word for preaching that most clearly articulates the

responsibility of the preacher is “steward.”¹⁸ The preacher is the keeper of the Word of God. His task is not to add anything to the Word, but to dispense it in such a way that the gospel message is faithfully proclaimed. Stott maintains that “the preacher is a steward of God’s mysteries, that is, of the self-revelation which God has entrusted to men and which is now preserved in the Scriptures.”¹⁹

A third approach to forming a biblical basis for preaching is to acknowledge the significant role preaching plays throughout the New Testament. When Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew 4, he begins preaching a message of repentance, not one that caters to social issues. When he teaches in the synagogues, he announces, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18). When the crowds want Jesus to stay and continue a ministry of healing, he responds, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:44). While Jesus ministers to the marginalized and the oppressed throughout his ministry, his primary focus is on proclaiming the coming of the his father’s kingdom.

The significance of the words for preaching is evident in the preaching of the early church. In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit falls upon them, the church begins to proclaim the gospel and call for repentance (vv. 22-41). Peter preaches a message of repentance in which he recounts the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-41). As a result of this proclamation, many lives are transformed.

¹⁸John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 23-24.

¹⁹Ibid., 17.

When persecution comes to Jerusalem, the church scatters, leaves Jerusalem, and proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. Barnabas, Saul, and later Luke, John Mark, and Silas go forth and proclaim the gospel (Acts 13:1-3; 15:36-41; 16:10). Scripture makes it clear that preaching helped birth the early church and was used to spread the gospel across the world.

Theological Basis of Preaching

Haddon Robinson maintains that in order to do the tough work of preaching the preacher must be committed to certain truths:

1. *The Bible is the Word of God.* As Augustine put it, “When the Bible speaks, God speaks.” This is the conviction that if he can truly understand a passage in its context, then what he knows is what God wants to say. (I don’t believe that many evangelicals as well as liberals really believe this).
2. *The entire Bible is the Word of God.* Not only Romans but Leviticus, not only Ephesians but Esther. Not merely the “hot” passages but the cold ones.
3. *The Bible is self-authenticating.* If people can be exposed to an understanding of the Scriptures on a regular basis, then they do not need arguments about the veracity of Scripture. Therefore, a listener or reader doesn’t have to buy into the first two commitments before God can work in a person’s life through his Word.
4. *This leads to a “Thus saith the Lord” approach to preaching.* I am not referring to a homiletical method here, but to a desire to open up the Scriptures so that the authority of the message rests on the Bible. (This works against the anti-authoritarian spirit of our society).
5. *The student of the Bible must try to get at the intent of the biblical writer.* The first question is, “What did the biblical writer want to say to the biblical reader? Why?” The Reader Response theory embraced by many literary scholars today will not work for the study of the Bible. Simply put, “The Bible cannot mean what it has not meant.”
6. *The Bible is a book about God.* It is not a religious book of advice about the “answers” we need about a happy marriage, sex, work, or losing weight. Although the Scriptures reflect on many of those issues, they are above all about who God is and what God thinks and wills. I understand reality only if I have an appreciation for who he is and what he desires for his creation.

7. *We don't make the Bible relevant; we show its relevance.* Truth is as relevant as water to thirst or food to hunger. Modern advertising creates needs that don't really exist to move the merchandise.²⁰

Robinson's ideas provide an excellent starting point to establish a theological foundation for biblical preaching. Robinson correctly asserts that the preacher must begin with a clear understanding of the Bible as the words of God. If the preacher maintains that when the Bible speaks God speaks, then he can preach with confidence knowing that the Word of God is fully authoritative. Robinson argues that because the Bible is the Word of God it is self-authenticating. Robinson also shows that one must not stray from that meaning in an attempt to make the text relevant.

While Robinson's ideas could be misused to manipulate the biblical text to conform to the whims of the preacher or congregation, Robinson safeguards against such a manipulation of the biblical text by insisting the interpreter begin his study by searching for the original intent of the biblical writer. When one carefully exegetes the text to determine the intended meaning of the author for the audience he addresses originally, one discovers the true meaning of the text. Since one must begin with the intended meaning of the biblical author, one must not stray from that meaning in an attempt to make the text relevant.

The belief that one must begin one's study of the biblical text by searching for the original intent of the author is not embraced by all scholars.²¹ Hirsch argues that

²⁰Haddon Robinson, "Convictions of Biblical Preaching," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communication*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.

²¹Scholars who argue against the need to search for the intended meaning of the author include Roland Barthes, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, N. T. Wright, and Jürgen Habermas. For more on their approaches to the text, see Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author" in *Authorship from Plato to Postmodernity*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 120-25; W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the*

when the author is removed from the interpretive process, subjectivity and relativism become a problem and “no adequate process [exists] for judging the validity of an interpretation.”²² Hirsch’s critics argue that he eliminates the opportunity for the meaning of the text to be impacted by the ill-effects of writing. They argue that the intended meaning of the author cannot stand alone unaffected by the signifiers within the text.²³ For many contemporary literary critics, to appeal to the authorial intent in one’s interpretation of a text is based upon the misguided assumption that the author impacts the text. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beasley propogate this assumption in their 1946 essay entitled, “The Intentional Fallacy.”²⁴

This present work operates with the understanding that the task of hermeneutics must begin with consideration of the author’s original intent. The argument that one cannot have complete knowledge of the author’s intent does not mean that one cannot determine the author’s intended meaning from a grammatical-historical study of the text. The further one moves from the author of the text, the closer one comes to a

Meaning of Poetry, ed. W. K. Wimsatt (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980); and N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God: Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

²²E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 3.

²³Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 78.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 82. Vanhoozer notes that there are four distinct intentional fallacies that present various arguments against the belief that the original intent of the author dictates the text. These four intentional fallacies are the “fallacy of relevancy,” which declares that the author’s intention is irrelevant for all interpretive purposes, the “fallacy of transparency,” which attacks Hirsch’s assumptions that meaning is an affair of consciousness and that an author knows his or her mind, the “fallacy of identity,” which argues that authorial intent collapses the distinction between the author’s intention and what is said in the text by treating them as one and the same, and the “fallacy of objectivity,” which argues against Hirsch’s notion that the interpretive object stands over against interpretive acts by countering that the object of consciousness does not exist apart from the subjective acts of consciousness that constitute it. See Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?*, 82-85.

reader-response interpretation in which the text takes on a life of its own based upon the experiences of the reader.

In addition to the sound ideas presented by Robinson, above, a theological foundation must be trinitarian in form. The theological basis should focus on the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates.²⁵ In what follows, I present a trinitarian foundation for preaching that forms the theological basis for preaching.

The God Who Speaks

A theological basis for preaching must begin with God. Unless God has spoken the preacher has nothing to say. The words κηρυσσειν and κηρυγμα both emphasize the content of the proclamation which finds its origin in the God who speaks, not in the cleverness of the preacher. In addition, Robinson maintains that one of the core convictions of biblical preaching is that the preacher must have a “Thus saith the Lord” approach to preaching.²⁶ The preacher must have an ardent desire to allow the authority of the preached word to come from the Bible.

As one discovers the process by which the God who speaks communicates to man one is forced to deal with the issues of revelation and inspiration. Stott believes that revelation and inspiration belong together, stating that revelation describes the initiative God has taken to unveil himself, while inspiration describes the process by which God accomplishes this feat.²⁷ God reveals himself in the written Word. Stott makes this point

²⁵Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 39. This trinitarian foundation for preaching comes from Mohler’s understanding of the theological foundation for preaching.

²⁶Robinson, “Convictions of Biblical Preaching,” 23.

²⁷Stott, “A Definition of Biblical Preaching,” 24.

clear when he declares,

If God had not spoken, we would not dare to speak, because we would have nothing to say except our own threadbare speculations. But since God has spoken, we too must speak, communicating to others what he has communicated in Scripture. Indeed, we refuse to be silenced. As Amos put it, “The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8), that is, pass on the Word he has spoken. Similarly, Paul echoing Psalm 115:10, wrote, “We believe and therefore we speak” (2 Cor 4:13). That is, we believe what God has spoken, and that is why we also speak.²⁸

The preacher must approach the Scripture with the conviction that its words are the very words of God. The preacher who does not acknowledge the God who speaks as part of the core foundation of preaching greatly hinders his ability to proclaim the biblical message. He has no confidence in the authority of the Bible because he is unsure of its origin. If God has not spoken, the role of the preacher is vain and useless.

The fact that God spoke His Word into being is further elucidated in the inspiration of Scripture. Second Timothy 3:16 tells us that all Scripture is inspired by God. Wayne Grudem notes that Paul affirms that all of the Scriptures are “breathed out by God.” Grudem indicates that since these writings are said to be “breathed out,” this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture. These writings, then, are the words that God spoke, even though he used human agents to pen the words.²⁹

MacArthur rightly contends that the inspiration of Scriptures does not refer to God breathing life into a human product, but it refers instead to Scripture originating from the very breath of God.³⁰ Since the God of truth cannot inspire error, according to

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 74-75.

³⁰John MacArthur, Jr., “The Spirit of God and Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Dallas: Word, 1992), 105.

MacArthur, one must acknowledge that the Bible's plenary inspiration guarantees its inerrancy.³¹ Therefore, God has spoken his Word through many different authors; the task of the preacher is to proclaim that which God has spoken.

The Son Who Saves

Not only must a sound theological basis for preaching focus on the God who speaks, but also on the person of Jesus Christ. Preaching must have as its object the Son who saves. The Son who saves was the focus of the early church. Dodd holds that the first four speeches of Peter in Acts provide a comprehensive view of the content of the early church preaching. Dodd outlines the content of this preaching under six headings:

First, the age of fulfillment dawned. Second, this has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, of which a brief account is given. Third, by virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as Messianic head of the new Israel. Fourth, the Holy Spirit in the Church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory. Fifth, the Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ. And finally, the *kerygma* always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness, and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of salvation.³²

The New Testament writers declare Christ to be at the center of the proclamation of the gospel. The writer of Hebrews opens his epistle with the declaration that the God who speaks has spoken most clearly and finally in his Son (Heb 1:1-2). Since the preacher is under divine commission to proclaim what God has spoken in his Word, the content of his message must be centered in Jesus Christ who is God's final and most supreme Word (John 1:1; Heb 1:1-3). Paul clearly understands that Christ is at the core of the Christian message. He describes his preaching to the Christians in Corinth

³¹Ibid.

³²C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and Its Early Development* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963), 38-43.

when he declares, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). Not only Paul, but Peter and John also center their proclamation on Christ’s ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation (1 Pet 1:17-21; 3:18; and 1 John 4:10).

One may rightly argue that much of the writing in the New Testament consists of ethical instruction, especially in the epistles. However, while one does find much ethical instruction within the New Testament epistles, these instructions, given by Paul in his epistles, have as their basis transformed lives made possible through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul does, indeed, call upon Christians to live lives worthy of their calling. However, he does this in light of the fact that God has redeemed them from their depraved state through the atoning blood of Christ and given them the Holy Spirit to empower them to live ethical lives (Rom 6:1-14; 8:1-11; Gal 5:16-26; Eph 4:17-32). Thus, even the ethical teachings of the epistles have at their heart, the Son who saves.

Having Jesus Christ as the object of the biblical message does not mean that every message has as its focus the suffering of Christ. The message may be focused on another aspect of the work and ministry of Jesus, but the work of Christ on the cross is still the fulcrum of the biblical message. Mohler underscores the significance of the cross of Christ in Christian preaching:

Christian preaching points to the incarnation of God in Christ as the stack pole and core of the Christian confession. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NASB). Thus, preaching itself is an act of grace. It is the primary means by which the redeemed make clear God’s initiative toward us in Christ and bear witness to the Son who saves. That message of divine salvation, the unmerited act of God in Christ, is the criterion by which all preaching is to be

judged.³³

Biblical sermons must be Christ-centered because Scripture is Christ-centered. John announces that Jesus Christ is the source of all meaning, the ground of all being, the very center of all that exists (John 1:1). Nothing exists apart from Him. The message that the early church took with them when they scattered from Jerusalem under threat of persecution was the life-changing message of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, the message points to a soon-coming King who will deliver his people and save them from their sins (Isa 9:6-7; 53). Throughout the Old Testament, the foundation is laid for the coming of Christ. All of the Old Testament points to Jesus, who fulfills the promises of redemption through his life, death, and resurrection.

The dilemma in much of the preaching in the emerging church is that the message is not centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. In an attempt to be tolerant, many revisionists offer mere moral maxims, believing that if they can lead their people to live good lives everything will be alright. With the strong tendency within the emerging church to emphasize practice over orthodoxy, the trend of just preaching on moral guidelines to follow is popular.³⁴ However, a sermon on moral behavior is inadequate and unbiblical if it does not point the listener to the power of God demonstrated through

³³Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 43.

³⁴Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). In this book, McLaren argues that what is needed in our churches is less concern for a stifling orthodoxy in which we can say all the creeds and hold to a propositional approach to Scripture, and more emphasis on orthopraxy in which one spends time doing what is good. One also sees the tendency to focus on moral behavior over an emphasis on the finished work of Christ in much of Rob Bell's work. See Rob Bell, *The Gods Aren't Angry* [DVD] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); idem, *Everything is Spiritual* [DVD] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). This tendency to downplay the finished work of Jesus on the Cross while focusing on the moral efforts of man is also apparent in much of the revisionist preaching analyzed in chap 6.

Christ. No one can walk in moral obedience apart from the righteousness of Christ.

In order for preaching to be a theological act in which God speaks, one must make sure the message proclaimed is Christ-centered. The congregation must understand that Jesus Christ is the hope for their fallen condition. The foundation of biblical preaching rests not only on the God who speaks, but also on the Son who saves.

The Spirit Who Illuminates

Although the preacher must stand before the congregation to proclaim the Word of the Lord, it is the Holy Spirit who works in the hearts and minds of hearers. A biblical theology of preaching must consider the role of the Holy Spirit for without an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, the preached message is impotent.³⁵ The definitions of preaching given above rightly emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit. Both the preacher and the congregation are at a loss to grasp the truth of God's Word apart from the Holy Spirit. Even though God has spoken and the Son saves, if the Holy Spirit does not illuminate all is vain. The Spirit's ministry of illumination allows the Word of the Lord to break forth and transform lives.

God speaks to the preacher through the Holy Spirit who calls and gifts him to proclaim the gospel. The preacher is compelled to carry out the preaching task under the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit.³⁶ He illuminates the biblical text, pricks the hearts of the hearers, and compels and empowers the preacher to preach the Word.

The term "illumination," according to Heisler, means "the process whereby

³⁵Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 45.

³⁶Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville: Broadman Holman Publishers, 2007), 5.

the Holy Spirit so impresses, convinces, and convicts the believer as to the truthfulness and significance of the author's intended meaning in the text that a change in action, attitude, or belief occurs, resulting in a more transformed, Spirit-filled life."³⁷ This definition is helpful because it reveals that the Holy Spirit convinces believers of the truth of God's Word and causes them to change their minds and behavior in light of those truths. Through this illuminating process, the believer is transformed by the power of the Spirit and begins walking in obedience.

The doctrine of the illumination of the Holy Spirit has a rich history that begins with a biblical foundation. The psalmist tells of the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit when he cries, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Ps 119:18). This role of the Holy Spirit is apparent in John 14:26 when Jesus says, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." These two passages indicate that the Holy Spirit illuminates one's mind to give one understanding and reveal God's truth. Another strong argument is made for the role of the illumination of the Holy Spirit by the Apostle Paul when he states, "And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:13-14).

Scripture also attests to the illumination of the Holy Spirit as a guide into all truth and the one who enlightens the eyes of the mind (John 16:13; Acts 6:14-15; Eph

³⁷Ibid., 43-44.

1:18). Paul indicates that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is vital to the Thessalonians' reception of the gospel. He writes, "[F]or we know brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:4-5). These passages attest to the role of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in bringing a conviction of the truths of God's Word.

Not only is there a rich biblical foundation for the illuminating role of the Holy Spirit, but there is also a rich Christian heritage among scholars. John Calvin argues from Ephesians 1:18 that men are incapable of understanding their own calling to righteousness apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ Calvin attests that although Christ came into the world that he might make the will of the Father known to man, nothing is accomplished by his preaching apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.³⁹

Another scholar who adds to the rich heritage of the study of the illuminating role of the Holy Spirit is John Owen. While Owen strongly endorses the Spirit's role in interpretation, he also believes that readers must use their hermeneutical skills in studying the Bible. Owen acknowledges that the depravity of human nature makes it impossible for man to accept or comprehend the truths of Scripture on his own.⁴⁰ However, he also notes that while human reason has been impaired by sin, the human mind can still reason, which makes the use of exegetical skills essential in the interpretation of the biblical text. These skills provide a basic understanding of the meaning of words that are key to the hermeneutical process. Owen further argues that these hermeneutical skills remain

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1065-68), 4:161.

subservient to the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit due to the supernatural nature of Scripture.⁴¹ For Owen, the Spirit is the primary means by which a believer understands biblical truth. The Spirit accomplishes this task by enlightening the mind of the believer and by illuminating the Scriptures so that the believer comprehends their truth.⁴²

The Holy Spirit's role can be summarized as follows: "The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning."⁴³ Calvin expresses it this way: "The Word is the instrument (*organum*) by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of His Spirit to believers."⁴⁴

God speaks, the Son saves, and the Spirit illuminates. When one's theology of preaching is built on this trinitarian foundation it will be biblically sound. The preacher must never forget that the authority behind his proclamation is God. Moreover, the content of his message must be centered on Jesus Christ. Finally, the Spirit illuminates the heart of the believer so that he can comprehend the truth as revealed in Scripture.

The Method of Preaching

Based on the theological foundation given, this dissertation defends an expository method of preaching. Expository preaching assures that the preacher's words are God's words. In expository preaching, the biblical text determines the shape and outline of the message delivered. By definition, exposition is "the process of laying open a biblical text

⁴¹Ibid., 4:155-58.

⁴²Ibid., 4:163.

⁴³ 1978 International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy. "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," no. 3.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1.7.4

in such a way that its original meaning is brought to bear on the lives of contemporary listeners.”⁴⁵ Thus, in expository preaching the focus is on exposing what lies in the text. The expository preacher seeks the original, intended meaning of the author and brings that to bear on contemporary lives in a relevant and truthful manner. He does this by considering the history, context, grammar, and differing genres as he attempts to ascertain what the biblical writer intended to convey to his original audience.

In expository preaching, application is essential. The preacher must not only thoroughly know the subject of his sermon, he must also have a keen understanding of the concerns and questions of his listeners. Only by anticipating the questions that will arise from the text can the preacher apply the text effectively.

The one who practices expository preaching also must understand that the authority for the sermon does not lie with the preacher but with the text. Robinson states that whether one practices biblical preaching is determined by one’s answer to the following question: “Do I, as a preacher, endeavor to bend my thought to the Scriptures, or do I use the Scriptures to support my thought?”⁴⁶ Within this answer lies the truth of biblical preaching. The preacher must approach the biblical text with the understanding that the Bible is authoritative and therefore must bend his will and thoughts to the truths of Scripture. One ceases to preach biblically when one simply utilizes the framework of the biblical text to support his preconceived notions and opinions. The biblical text must be the grid through which the preacher sifts his own presuppositions and biases to arrive

⁴⁵Jerry Vines and James Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 28.

⁴⁶Haddon Robinson, “My Theory of Homiletics: Three Ideas Shape My Approach to Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 58.

at the biblical truth he is called upon to proclaim. He can best accomplish this task by utilizing an expository method of preaching.

Conclusion

Scripture bears testimony to the fact that preaching is proclaiming God's Word. For example, Timothy was urged by Paul to "preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). A careful exegetical study of the major terms for preaching throughout the biblical text also reveals that the emphasis is on the God who speaks and the content of the message.

A survey of preaching throughout Scripture reveals its importance and elucidates its meaning. From Genesis to Revelation, God speaks. He makes known His purpose and truth. He continually raises up spokesmen to proclaim his Word. The prophets deliver the words of God with the understanding that they are not delivering their own opinion. Jesus came preaching repentance. His disciples proclaim the message of his life, death, and resurrection. When they are told to no longer to speak in his name, they testify of the things they have seen and heard. In the same way, the early church proclaims the message of the gospel.

Preaching not only has a solid, biblical foundation, but also stands firmly on a strong theological foundation. The theological foundation that undergirds preaching is trinitarian: the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates. This trinitarian foundation is critical to biblical preaching and provides the testing ground for all faithful preaching.

The method of preaching that most clearly articulates this theological foundation is expository preaching. When one attempts to speak to an ever-changing

culture concerning the abiding truth one must start with the biblical text. Expository preaching is the most effective method of preaching because it allows the text to shape and form the sermon. Furthermore, expository preaching is the method of preaching that most clearly views the biblical text as guiding the thoughts and opinions of the preacher rather than the text merely becoming a means to support one's presuppositions.

The issues of truth and authority are of paramount importance in one's understanding of preaching. If preaching is viewed as a dialogue among friends in which the sources of authority are shared among life experiences, cultural norms, and past traditions, then the authority of the Bible is silenced. Once Scripture is viewed as equally authoritative to experience, culture, or tradition, the church is left with the dilemma of determining which authority is correct. The answer often given in the emerging church is dependent on the prevailing circumstances and differing whims of the community. Thus, the authority of the Bible is determined by the community and their life experiences.

Faulty claims to authority also impact one's approach to the biblical text. If one believes that authority is found outside of the biblical text, then he will not see a necessity to start with the biblical text when preaching. Rather than exposing the text to understand the intended meaning of the biblical author, the preacher may allow, for instance, the community to become an authority on the meaning of the text. This approach moves the focus away from the truth of God's Word and to the experiences and opinions of others.

When the Word of God is no longer what God has spoken, the message is no longer centered on Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit ceases to be the source of illumination, the message has no power to change lives. As the revisionist leaders within

the emerging church look to other areas of authority, the Bible loses its place of prominence. The consequence of such an authority shift is a group of people who determine their own truth and rewrite their own stories. While revisionist preaching might be attractive to many postmoderns today, it is not biblical preaching.

CHAPTER 3

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGING CHURCH

As mentioned earlier, the emerging church is difficult to define. In fact, attempting to define it would be offensive to many within the emerging conversation. Although this present conversation finds the emerging church's origin in the late 1990's, Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne argue that it emerged in 1970. They define the emerging church as a process of becoming, moving toward a fulfillment of its calling.¹ Dan Kimball believes Larson and Osborne's definition captures the essence of the conversation when they note that the Church has been in the process of becoming and it shall always be so.² This conviction, that changes in today's culture signal a new church is emerging, lies at the very heart of the emerging church conversation. Emergents believe that those leaders who do not adapt will no longer connect with this postmodern generation. They argue that since our culture has become a melting pot of cultures, ideologies, and philosophies, the church must adjust its message and methodology in order to accommodate the ever-changing culture. This recognition of a changing culture gave rise to the development of the emerging church.

¹Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *The Emerging Church*, ed. Richard Engquist (Waco: Word, 1970), 11.

²Dan Kimball, *Vintage Faith*, April 2006 [on-line]; accessed 18 March 2010; available from http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_emerging_church.html; Internet.

The Origin of the Emerging Church

The emerging church began as a group of Christian leaders who were asking similar questions regarding the gospel and ministering in the culture.³ These leaders met as a part of Leadership Network in the late 1990s to focus on ministry methodology for emerging generations. They did not focus on specific age groups or people groups, but rather on cultural change. According to Kimball, these churches focused on the mission of Jesus and his Kingdom in an emerging culture. This group included a variety of Christian leaders: Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball, Tony Jones, Chris Seay, Mark Driscoll, and Brian McLaren.⁴

Initially, in the United States, the emerging church conversation consisted primarily of evangelical churches attempting to account for the absence of 18 to 35 year-olds from the church. Kimball asserts that as the leaders began looking more closely at the situation, they discovered that there was much more taking place than simply the absence of a particular age group.⁵ Rather than simply focusing on evangelistic efforts to reach the younger generation, these leaders realized that the culture was changing dramatically and that their concerns were more epistemological in nature. The younger generation was dealing with the shift from modernism to postmodernism. This culture shift gradually led to a growing diversity among those who embraced the emerging

³Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 89.

⁴Kimball, *Vintage Faith*.

⁵Stephen Shields, *Ten Years Out: A Retrospective on the Emerging Church in North America*. issue 121, January 2009 [on-line]; accessed 18 March 2010; available from <http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue121/index.cfm?id=44+ref=COVERSTORY>; Internet.

church conversation.⁶

One can also learn something of the origin of the emerging church from the life stories of some of its key leaders who were reacting to the traditions from which they came.⁷ In *Stories of Emergence*, Mike Yaconelli chronicles the lives of fifteen individuals and their emergence from traditional, conservative churches to more liberating ministries.⁸

For example, Spencer Burke once served as one of the pastors of Mariners Church in Irvine, California. Mariners was a megachurch with a twenty-five-acre property and a \$7.8 million budget.⁹ Burke became disenchanted with the affluence of the church as well as the “systematic” discipleship programs and the fundamentalist, conservative eschatology in which he had been trained. He eventually left the church when he came to realize that he could not accept contemporary Christianity as an institution.¹⁰

Yaconelli’s book has a flavor of protest and rejection. The life stories he chronicles express the following theme: we were once where you are, but we emerged into

⁶Ibid.

⁷D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 14.

⁸Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁹Ibid., 28.

¹⁰Ibid. Burke’s emergence is most clearly seen in the website he developed. He calls it “the ooze” and it is metaphorical. He intends it to be a place where the various parts of the faith community are like mercury, sometimes they roll together and sometimes they roll apart. If you try to constrain it, the substance will resist. Burke states, “rather than force people to fall into line, an oozy community tolerates differences and treats people who hold opposing views with great dignity. To me, that’s the essence of the emerging church. See his website at <http://www.theooze.com>; Internet.

something different.¹¹ Yaconelli believes the common ground for those within the emerging church is the move from “absolute” to “authentic.”¹² He believes many emergents left traditional evangelical churches because they felt in bondage to the rigid teachings that traditionalists viewed as non-negotiable. These emergents have replaced these absolute beliefs for teachings that are more flexible and a people who do not claim to have the one, true answer but are instead open to a variety of answers.

Although the emerging church conversation may have started as a thought-provoking conversation among a small group of Christian leaders who were genuinely concerned about reaching the younger generation, it has evolved into a serious debate over what it means to be a Christian.¹³ Many of the revisionist leaders within the emerging church have taken very non-traditional views of long-standing doctrines. Among these doctrines are Scripture, salvation, Jesus, sin, and hell. The revisionists’ open approach to these doctrines widens the chasm between them and traditional evangelical believers.

The Diverse Nature of the Emerging Church

Within the emerging church, there are some churches that have a passionate desire to reach the postmodern culture and still maintain the doctrinal integrity of the Word of God. However, others not only see a need to change the methods of ministering to today’s society, but they also believe the message must be adapted. Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, declares, “This is not just the same old message with new methods, we’re discovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a

¹¹Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 15.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church,” 89.

way of life. Legal metaphors for faith don't deliver a new way of life."¹⁴ Andy Crouch writes concerning Bell and his wife, "They are looking for a faith that is colorful enough for their culturally savvy friends, deep enough for mystery, and big enough for their own doubts. To get there, they are willing to abandon some long-defended battle lines."¹⁵

The diversity that makes up those embracing the emerging church conversation has led Ed Stetzer, a noted missiologist, to classify the emerging church into three separate categories. He classifies them as relevants, reconstructionists, and revisionists. Those classified as relevants are often theologically conservative and focused more on updating worship styles, preaching styles, and leadership models than reshaping theology. They are committed to biblical preaching and biblical leadership and endorse many of the values common to evangelical churches. They are simply attempting to proclaim the gospel in an understandable manner.¹⁶ Within the larger group of relevants is a growing group of missionally-minded Reformed individuals who look to men like John Piper, Timothy Keller, and D. A. Carson for theological direction.¹⁷

The reconstructionists are essentially theologically evangelical but dissatisfied with the evangelical church. They question many of the current forms of church, responding to the fact that after decades of trying new forms North America remains as

¹⁴Rob Bell, as quoted in Andy Crouch, "Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 38.

¹⁵Crouch, "Emergent Mystique," 38.

¹⁶Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 188-90.

¹⁷Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church," 89. Driscoll in this article states that Rob Bell fits in this category along with Dan Kimball, Chris Seay, and Erwin McManus. However, given Bell's desire to continually repaint the Christian faith and his verbal testimony that he is not simply changing the methods but also the message (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12, I place him among the revisionists, given his questioning of key doctrines. Given the fact that this article was published in 2006, Driscoll may very well place Bell in the category with the revisionists today.

unchurched as it was before these forms were employed. As a result, they focus on developing community in the church.¹⁸ These leaders maintain orthodox views of the gospel while arguing that the forms of the church must change. This group views Neil Cole, Michael Frost, and Alan Hirsch as like-minded leaders.¹⁹

The revisionists, on the other hand, question key evangelical doctrines. Stetzer points out that “they question and in some cases deny the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the nature of gender, and the nature of the gospel itself.”²⁰ Revisionist leaders include Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Rob Bell, Spencer Burke, Steve Chalke, and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Tim Conder. These men espouse some conservative beliefs at times, but their writings and sermons demonstrate a questioning attitude and, at times, a denial of these key doctrinal truths aforementioned.

For example, McLaren calls into question the substitutionary atonement of Christ by relegating the cross event to an identification with the marginalized in his sermons and denigrating substitutionary atonement in his books. He gives the cross the most attention in his book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. Here, however, he only gives it six pages, mentioning the various theories of atonement without embracing any one of them. In fact, when substitutionary atonement is explained, McLaren has one of his characters, Kerry, quip that it sounds like divine child abuse. Kerry’s statement is not questioned or corrected; rather it is acknowledged as legitimate as the other theories.²¹

¹⁸Stetzer and Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 189.

¹⁹Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church,” 90.

²⁰Stetzer and Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 190.

²¹Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 101-

Similarly, Bell denies that hell is a reality. Instead, he says that it refers to the garbage heap of Jesus' day and argues that there is very little, if any, teaching on hell as a place of eternal punishment.²²

Characteristics that Unite the Emerging Church

While there is a great deal of diversity within the emerging church, there are also some values and practices that unite them. One group that formed as a result of their shared dreams and desires for the church is the Emergent Village. The Emergent Village began as a group of friends who gathered under the auspices and generosity of Leadership Network in the late 1990's. They began meeting because they were disillusioned with the practices of churches in the late twentieth century. When they met, they discovered that they had similar dreams for their lives and for how their lives intersected with the growing understandings of the kingdom of God. According to their website, the Emergent Village is a growing generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love their world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. A generative friendship means that they are a community capable of creating meaning and establishing relationships. A thorough investigation of their website reveals that they are short on doctrine and long on relationships.²³

Tony Jones, former national coordinator of Emergent Village, presents the “Emergent Village Values and Practices,”²⁴ which consists of four ordering values. These values and practices focus on commitment to God in the way of Jesus, commitment to the

²²Rob Bell, *Hell*, Mars Hill Bible Church, 24 September 2006 [on-line]; accessed 14 November 2006; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings>; Internet.

²³“Emergent Village: A Growing Generative Friendship” [on-line]; accessed 14 April 2010; available from <http://www.emergentvillage.com>; Internet.

²⁴Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 222.

church in all its forms, commitment to God's world, and commitment to one another.²⁵

Within these values and practices includes living by the Great Commandment to love God and your neighbor. They also state that the gospel is centered on Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God. However, they do not define the gospel, nor do they articulate what they mean by the kingdom of God. The Emergent Village Values and Practices state that they affirm the historic Christian faith, but they do not specify what that faith is. In fact, they state that they are not interested in establishing articles of faith.²⁶

The Emergent Village's focus on the life of Jesus, the church, creation, and one another is similar to what Gibbs and Bolger see as those factors that unite emerging churches. They define emerging churches in this way:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (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.²⁷

This definition reflects the values of the Emergent Village and depicts the sociological make up of emerging churches.

Postmodern Influences

The methodology and message of the emerging church leaders reveals a strong postmodern influence. The first step in recognizing the influence of postmodernism on

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 43-45.

the emerging church is to gain a clearer understanding of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is an attitude or mood, that arose as a rejection of modernism. One modernist element rejected by postmoderns is clear, concise definitions.²⁸ Therefore, gaining a clear grasp of postmodernism is a very difficult challenge given the various definitions that abound.

Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as “an incredulity about metanarratives.”²⁹ He believed that these all-inclusive explanations for reality are no longer tenable, but are merely explanations presented by those seeking to shape society. In fact, he rejected large-scale theories and philosophies, such as the progress of history, the ability to gain knowledge of all things through science, and the possibility of absolute freedom.³⁰ He argues that postmoderns do not believe that narratives of this kind are adequate because they have become aware of differences, diversity, and the incompatibility of their dreams, beliefs, and desires with these grand narratives offered by various authorities. As a result, they opt for an abundance of mini-narratives to explain reality as they know it.³¹

The type of postmodernism embraced by revisionists within the emerging

²⁸David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 61.

²⁹Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv. Lyotard studies the condition of knowledge in highly-developed societies that Lyotard refers to as postmodernism. He argues that major changes have taken place in culture as a result of a crisis of narrative.

³⁰*Ibid.*, xxiv.

³¹*Ibid.*, xxiv-xxv. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9-10. Vanhoozer acknowledges the postmodern tendency to reject metanarratives, noting that postmoderns cut metanarratives down to size and see them as mere stories. In doing so, postmoderns take a step away from the authority of universal stories and a step toward an abundance of mini-narratives that are stories of local knowledge.

church is that which R. Scott Smith identifies as “street level,” or popular level postmodernism.³² Popular level postmodernism manifests itself in attitudes such as suspicion of authorities’ claims to be telling the truth. Instead of accepting these truth claims at face value, popular level postmodernists believe that those in authority are seeking to preserve power rather than seeking the good of the people.³³ This level of postmodernism also displays a suspicion of hierarchies, a distrust of modern science, and searches for authenticity in people.³⁴ Many of these manifestations of postmodernism are good qualities. In certain situations, one may have a good reason to question hierarchies (e.g., the government’s decision to become involved in Vietnam War), or to distrust modern science (e.g., the theory of evolution presented as fact). Revisionists’ within the emerging church are street level (popular) postmodernists.

Academic postmodernism manifests itself in the suspicion of human reason’s abilities. This suspicion arose as a reaction to the Enlightenment and its presentation of foundationalism with reason as its base. Modernists believe man can know universal truths through reason.³⁵ Postmodernists reject one’s ability to know such truth claims. Academic postmodernism also denies one’s ability to know the world as it really is, claiming instead that human beings make or shape the world themselves. This level of postmodernism also undermines the claim that one can know objective truth.³⁶ While

³²R. Scott Smith, *Truth and The New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effect of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 17.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., 17-18.

³⁵Ibid., 19.

³⁶Ibid.

some of the works of the revisionists may include ideas that are similar to academic postmodernism, their knowledge of postmodernism is more of a street-level knowledge.

According to postmoderns, one can no longer maintain that he or she has a God's-eye point of view because there is no authoritative story that runs throughout history. Therefore, one cannot make moral judgments. Instead, one lives with many little narratives that make the postmodern condition a critical one. One is left in the midst of a philosophical quagmire: Whose story is true? Whose story interpretation is correct? Whose authority is final, and why?³⁷ Vanhoozer rightly points out the inconsistency in Lyotard's thinking:

Lyotard dismisses metanarratives but does he not present his own account in metanarrative terms, that is, as the "true" story of knowledge? We here encounter a common phenomenon in postmodern theorizing, namely, the appearance of performative self-contradiction.³⁸

Lyotard's inconsistency is evident in much of postmodern writing. While he decries the use of metanarratives to gain meaning, he employs his own metanarrative to propagate his correct version of knowledge. Postmoderns refuse to live within the very parameters they establish.

Aspects of Postmodernism That Impact the Emerging Church

While the revisionist leaders within the emerging church do not show a familiarity with many of the philosophers who embrace postmodernism, several aspects of postmodernism thought impact their preaching. The aspects of postmodernism that have impacted revisionists the most are storytelling, truth, relativism, and pluralism.

³⁷Ibid., 10.

³⁸Ibid.

Storytelling

The Postmodernists do not believe that society should concern itself with truth claims; instead, they embrace the idea of telling their personal stories. They embrace the idea that people tell stories in order to explain the world. They do not necessarily believe that any of their stories are reality; they simply represent reality made up of incomplete and often inaccurate information.³⁹

The use of story to explain truth is not a new notion. Lyotard believes that all those who claimed to dictate truth were nothing more than storytellers propagating their own metanarrative. He opted instead for local narratives that explained truth or reality according to the perception of the corresponding community.

Truth

As mentioned earlier, postmodernism is suspicioning of modernity. Truth lies at postmodernism's core. Premoderns found truth in revelation, while the modernists claim truth is found in reason and science. For postmoderns, however, truth is not found at all—it is created.⁴⁰ They reject the notion of absolute truth, and believe they can create their own truth. According to postmoderns, a universal truth for all people does not exist.⁴¹

Postmodernists claim that there is no truth that exists apart from one's affections, opinions, and surroundings. They deny the possibility of ever grounding

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Gary Gilley, "The Emergent Church," in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 270.

⁴¹Ibid.

knowledge in an absolute view of reality and contend that all knowledge is forever mediated by language and interpretation. Steven Ward points out that “this means that knowledge, regardless of where it is found, always bears the mark of hermeneutical intervention. According to postmoderns, knowledge is forever a product of the power to nominate and of rhetoric.⁴² They contend that what is often referred to as truth is merely a manipulation of language to serve the purpose of those in power.

Not only do postmoderns question the universality of truth, some also view truth as a means of manipulation by those in power to press their truth claims on the populace. A postmodern philosopher who adhered to the belief that truth is the exertion of power over those in a lesser position is Michel Foucault. Foucault believed that behind every truth claim there lurks rhetorical posturing revealing that knowledge claims are violent impositions by powerful institutions and that universal truth claims are simply masks for ideology and the will to power.⁴³ For Foucault, the ideal of one seeking and discovering truth without bias replaced by the concept of power producing truth. And, according to Foucault, those who possess the power, dictate the truth. Foucault states,

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power; contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.⁴⁴

⁴²Steven C. Ward, *Reconfiguring Truth* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), xvii.

⁴³Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 133. Foucault studied prisons and mental institutions and became convinced that the power exerted over these individuals is similar to the power exerted by those who profess to have the correct understanding of truth.

⁴⁴Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Press, 1979), 131.

Another postmodern philosopher who believed that truth was a vehicle of oppression was Friedrich Nietzsche. He argued passionately against truth claims, seeing them as a tool in the hands of those exerting power over the oppressed. He described truth in this fashion: “Truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically.”⁴⁵ Truth claims for Nietzsche were not a list of facts that were verifiable and should be adhered to, but interpretations that have been created and are often embellished.

Nietzsche saw these truth claims as binding cords that kept the public enslaved to the interpretations of those in power, though they had no better access to the truth than anyone else.⁴⁶ When Nietzsche announced the death of God, foundational truth, and morality, it was not a time of mourning, but a time to celebrate a newly-gained freedom:

Indeed, we philosophers and “free spirits” feel, when we hear the news that “the old god is dead” as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectations. At long last the horizon appears free to us again once more, . . . our ships venture out again, venture out to face any danger perhaps there has never yet been such an open sea.⁴⁷

One can hear, in Nietzsche’s words, the tenor of the postmodern mind rejoicing at the freedom to create its own truth.

Relativism

Another threat to truth within postmodernism is the issue of relativism. D. A.

⁴⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 46-47.

⁴⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 280.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Carson defines relativism as “the theory that denies absolutism and insists that morality and religion are *relative* to the people who embrace them.”⁴⁸ In other words, relativism gives each person the right to determine for himself what is true and good and beautiful as it pertains to him. Although some postmodernists deny the charge of relativism, it is evident in much of their practice.

The belief that truth is relative receives support from the philosophical world. Richard Rorty, a noted philosopher, indicates his belief that reality is largely interpreted by each person in accordance with his own subjective condition.⁴⁹ He clarifies his position by maintaining that he does not agree with a radical relativism in which each individual can simply determine truth for themselves. He emphasizes the social influence on the individual and his beliefs,⁵⁰ and he views truth as an agreement among the members of the community. Thus, truth is established among the members of the community who influence the beliefs of one another.

This view of truth also finds support from Stanley Fish, a prominent literary theorist known for his arguments concerning meaning and truth. Fish sums up the mindset of postmodern thinkers with these words:

The fact of agreement, rather than being a proof of the stability of objects, is a testimony to the power of an interpretive community to constitute the objects upon which its members can then agree. Disagreements about interpretation cannot be settled by the fact, rather these disagreements are the means by which the facts are settled.⁵¹

⁴⁸Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 31.

⁴⁹Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 338.

In other words, interpretation cannot be determined by the facts but through conversation.

The problem that arises with this community view of truth is that truth becomes very fluid. Truth fluctuates regularly depending on the nature, mindset, and location of the community. Truth has various meanings for differing communities. As each person in the community presents the truth that seems right to them and embraces that truth, the question of whose truth is the correct truth goes unanswered. In this scenario, truth is created or produced rather than discovered.

Pluralism

In keeping with the postmodern mindset that truth cannot be clearly known, pluralism is a natural consequence. Today's society is, indeed, a pluralistic society. The world finds it offensive when one declares to have the truth. Carson aptly depicts today's climate:

Philosophical pluralism has generated many approaches in support of one stance; namely, that any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is *necessarily* wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior.⁵²

This climate leads once again to a new understanding of tolerance, which leads to an increase in the telling of stories in which everyone's conversation is accepted as equally valid.

Nicholas Rescher, noted philosopher in the areas of pragmatism and process philosophy, defines pluralism as "the doctrine that any substantial question admits a

⁵²D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 19.

variety of plausible but mutually conflicting responses.”⁵³ Rescher’s definition acknowledges the diversity of cultures and beliefs within our society and the sense that there is not necessarily only one correct view of truth. Carson offers an understanding of pluralism that more closely describes the postmodern mindset: “Pluralism is the philosophical posture which insists that tolerance must be granted to all views on the ground that none can claim to be true.”⁵⁴ The postmodern mindset embraces the view that there can be no universal truth, no one view that is more correct than the other.

For postmoderns, everything is a social construct. All claims to truth are rooted in cultural bias; there is no objective truth. Ethical values are the product of unique cultural traditions; there are no moral absolutes. Human personhood is the product of socialization; there is no universal human essence. According to Kenneth Gergen, a noted postmodern psychologist, “Postmodernists reject the possibility of discovering objective truth all together, since each culture approaches reality differently, depending on its particular needs and historical conditions.”⁵⁵ Within postmodernism there is no individual sense of worth. Worth is formed by the various cultural perspectives. This view of pluralism in which every perspective is equally valued leads to the demise of personal definition, reason, and authority. All intrinsic properties of the human being, along with moral worth and personal commitment, are lost from view.⁵⁶

This pluralistic mindset prevalent in postmodernism is not effective in creating

⁵³Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 79.

⁵⁴D. A. Carson, “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 33.

⁵⁵Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 228-29.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 229.

truth; in fact, it trivializes it. The postmodern who views everyone's claim as equally valid negates everyone's claim to truth. If all meaning, all authority, all sense of worth is derived from the perspectives of culture, then truth is as fluid as the ever-changing perspectives of the community. In an effort to be tolerant of everyone's perspective, postmoderns have lost the essence of that which is true.

In the following section I will present several theological issues that are points of contention between the revisionists and the traditional evangelicals. Each doctrine will be presented by first giving a brief overview of the traditional view then following that with the revisionists' understanding. Once these doctrines have been examined, I will present a section that addresses the revisionists' misunderstanding of truth and authority.

Theological Issues within the Emerging Church

The emerging church's ardent attempt to connect with the postmodern mindset often leads them to abandon many of the doctrinal truths at the core of traditional evangelical theology. Albert Mohler explains where emerging church philosophy leads theologically:

The worldview of postmodernism—complete with an epistemology that denies the possibility of or need for propositional truth—affords the movement an opportunity to hop, skip, and jump throughout the Bible and the history of Christian thought in order to take whatever pieces they want from one theology and attach them, like doctrinal post-it notes, to whatever pictures they would want to draw.⁵⁷

While many emerging church leaders claim fidelity to the Scriptures and historic doctrines of the church their doctrine, after deconstruction, is unrecognizable as biblical doctrine. Dan Kimball believes that the church must “deconstruct, reconstruct, and

⁵⁷Albert Mohler, as quoted by David Roach, “Leaders Call ‘Emerging Church Movement’ a Threat to Gospel,” *BP News*, 23 March 2005 [on-line]; accessed 12 June 2005; available from <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=20420>; Internet.

redefine biblical terms.”⁵⁸ Although Kimball is speaking more about methods of communication, others in the emerging church have adopted these terms as methods of interpretation. Once these terms are reworked, their meanings and uses will vary from church to church.

For example, Rob Bell believes that our old theological systems are flawed and need a fresh change. Bell wants to make sure that one understands that those in the emerging churches are talking about changing more than just the methodology of the traditional churches:

By this I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music, sharper graphics, and new methods with easy-to-follow steps. I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived, and explained.⁵⁹

For Bell, nearly all doctrines are open to redefinition. He writes that his faith would not be shaken if he discovered that the gospel writers merely invented the story of the virgin birth of Jesus and he was really born of a natural man.⁶⁰ Thus, Bell renders dispensable the doctrines of the inspiration of Scripture, the virgin birth, the incarnation, and the substitutionary atonement of Christ, because a mere man could not pay our sin debt.

In their attempt to reach postmoderns, the revisionists are willing to call into question, rework, and redefine many of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. For many of these leaders, the question is not “What do you believe?” but rather “How do you live your life?” The loss of traditional evangelical doctrines is of little consequence

⁵⁸Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 178.

⁵⁹Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 26-27.

to the revisionists; in fact, they welcome this radical change. In some ways, the revisionists essentially rethink almost every major doctrine.

The Doctrine of Scripture

The first of these theological issues that separate revisionists from the traditional evangelical Christian is that of the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture. The traditional evangelical view of Scripture is that all the words in Scripture are God's Words. Both the Old and New Testaments support this position.⁶¹

Revisionists view Scripture differently. Many of them prefer the gospels over the letters of Paul, which indicates that they believe that the message of the gospels is more authoritative.⁶² The revisionists also view Scripture as merely one source of authority among several. They appeal to the community, church tradition, and the experience of the listeners along with Scripture for their source of authority.⁶³

McLaren calls into question the divine inspiration of Scripture by doubting the

⁶¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 73. Wayne Grudem points out that there are numerous claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God's Words. He states that in the Old Testament the introductory statements of the prophets declare, "Thus, saith the Lord," proclaiming that they are not speaking their own words but the very words of God. While Grudem is quick to point out that this does not refer to every word of the Old Testament, he notes that the sheer volume of passages that demonstrate that they are the very words of God verify a large portion of the Old Testament as God's Words. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 74. The New Testament also speaks to the issue of the Old Testament being the very words of God. Paul declares that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). The New Testament is also seen to be authoritative as recognized by Peter, when he acknowledges the letters of Paul as Scripture (2 Pet 3:15-16). Traditional evangelical Christians believe that the Scriptures are authoritative because they are the very Words of God and like the words delivered by the prophets, they must be obeyed. Furthermore, these words are believed to be divinely inspired thus strengthening their authority (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21).

⁶²Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 94-95; see also Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 42.

⁶³Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). This book presents Pagitt's new hermeneutic in which he places the authority of scripture into the hands of each of the listeners so that the meaning can be determined by the listening community. See also Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free for All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). This book presents Conder and Rhodes' community hermeneutic which is very similar to Pagitt's approach.

reliability and authority of the Pauline epistles when he derogatorily refers to those who form their theological understanding of the gospel from Paul's letter to the Romans as "Roman Protestants."⁶⁴ He discredits the authority of Romans when he argues that we should look to the gospels for the understanding of the gospel and not to Paul's letters.⁶⁵

Bell also casts doubt on the divine inspiration of Scripture. When interviewed by Andy Crouch, Bell explained that he was discovering the Bible as a human product rather than the product of divine fiat.⁶⁶ Rather than emphasizing the divine inspiration of Scripture, Bell contends that each of the biblical authors had personal agendas in their writings that they sought to present. He downplays the role of inspiration when he notes that "those who wrote the biblical text were not guided by some outside force, they presented their own agendas."⁶⁷

Bell also calls into question the authority of the Bible. He contends that when Jesus stated, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19), he was giving the church the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible.⁶⁸ Bell quips that Jesus is giving the church permission to say, "Hey, we think we missed it before on that verse, and we've recently come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means."⁶⁹ In other words, Bell believes that the Word, as given by

⁶⁴Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 2010), 138.

⁶⁵Ibid., 138-39. A divine fiat refers to an arbitrary act of God.

⁶⁶Rob Bell, quoted in *Christianity Today*, 38.

⁶⁷Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 99.

⁶⁸Ibid., 50.

⁶⁹Ibid.

God, might have missed the mark and so Jesus is giving the church the authority to change it.

Another revisionist who casts doubt on the Bible's authority is Doug Pagitt. Pagitt presents a relational set hermeneutic in which the community is given a favored position over both tradition and Scriptures. This hermeneutic is demonstrated most clearly in Pagitt's *Progressional Dialogue*, which he offers as a cure for preaching.⁷⁰ He contends that this is not merely a new type of preaching, but a new hermeneutic that emphasizes the relational aspect of the community. Pagitt believes that this dialogue is successful because it allows people the opportunity to share their beliefs and life experiences. He deems the service a success if they have truly listened to one another and grown to accept their differences.⁷¹ Pagitt believes that the Bible is merely one source of authority among many and that it does not supersede the authority of the community. For example, he argues that creeds and confessions are too contextually limited. Pagitt contends that the church lives in different times now and must adjust to these times. According to Pagitt, "[Churches] are called to be communities that are cauldrons of theological imagination, not 'authorized re-staters' of past ideas."⁷² He believes that churches should create their own theology, not borrow from the past. For Pagitt, "Community, (not tradition or the Scriptures), is the place where God dwells."⁷³

⁷⁰Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). In this book, Pagitt presents an approach to preaching in which the pastor's voice is not the only one that speaks to the issues of truth. According to Pagitt, truth rests in each person present.

⁷¹Ibid., 54.

⁷²Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," in *Listening to Beliefs of Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 127.

⁷³Ibid.

The Doctrine of Jesus

Another significant theological issue that the revisionists are reworking is the understanding of the doctrine of Jesus. The traditional evangelical view of the doctrine of Jesus Christ is summarized well by Millard Erickson. He states that the biblical evidence strongly supports that Jesus Christ has both a human and divine nature in one person.⁷⁴

The revisionists downplay the deity of Jesus by highlighting his humanity, almost in exclusion to his deity. In their writings and preaching one sees little, if any, emphasis on the cross and Christ crucified.⁷⁵ In fact, revisionists voice a disdain for the traditional evangelical church's dominant theme of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Revisionists do not deny that Jesus is divine. They simply downplay the significance of his divinity. For example, Bell preached a sermon entitled, *It Stops Here*, in which he addressed the need to end the vicious cycle of anger and revenge. He bases his sermon on the text, "And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Here he emphasizes that Jesus was the model of forgiveness. Bell does not address why Jesus was on the cross or what he was accomplishing on the cross. Jesus was simply demonstrating to us how to be better people.⁷⁶

Bell is also critical of those who emphasize the need to evangelize the lost based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Bell explains Jesus' work on the cross

⁷⁴Millard J. Erickson, "The Unity of the Person of Christ," in *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, ed. L. Arnold Hustad, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 233. This belief has been hotly debated in the past and continues to be a source of contention in the present. In the past there were six basic heresies surrounding the person of Jesus Christ. For more information on the six major heresies concerning the person of Christ, see Erickson, "The Unity of the Person of Christ," 239.

⁷⁵In the over one hundred sermons that I listened to or read, there was very little mention of the cross of Christ. The subject of Jesus' atoning death at Calvary was rarely, if ever, mentioned.

⁷⁶Rob Bell, *It Stops Here*, Mars Hill Bible Church, June 27, 2008 [on-line]; accessed 12 September 2008; available from <http://www.marshill.org/podcasts>; Internet.

in this way:

So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross, he was reconciling all things, in heaven and earth, to God. All things, everywhere. This really isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making.⁷⁷

For Bell, one's choice becomes one of either trusting Jesus' retelling of one's story through his reconciliation or one's own telling of our story. He contends that the reality we decide to live in extends beyond this life. According to Bell, both heaven and hell are filled with forgiven people whom God loves and Jesus died for.⁷⁸ Thus, for Bell, Jesus' death accomplished the forgiveness of everyone's sins.

McLaren also offers a divergent view of the doctrine of Jesus. He contends that contrary to traditional evangelical thought, Jesus did not come merely to save souls from hell. Instead, "Jesus came to launch a new Genesis, to lead a new Exodus, and to announce, embody, and inaugurate a new kingdom as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Seen in this light, Jesus and his message have everything to do with poverty, slavery, and a 'social agenda.'"⁷⁹ For McLaren, the good news that Jesus heralds is not the message of salvation; rather, it is the announcement of a new social agenda. This same concept is evident in McLaren's sermons as well as in his writings.⁸⁰ He does not focus on the fact that Jesus Christ is fully God or that he came to seek and to save those who are lost.

The revisionists pursue what they perceive to be the social agenda of Jesus.

⁷⁷Ibid., 146.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 135.

⁸⁰Ibid. See also Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006); idem, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

They focus on the Jesus of popular culture, not the Jesus of the church, believing that the church's view is too focused on salvation, and ignores his social ministry. Karen Ward, pastor of Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington sheds some light on their approach to Jesus when she states, "The cultural view 'gets' that Jesus was for the marginalized and the oppressed. It is only the church that needs to look at Jesus again."⁸¹

A closer look at the revisionists' teaching on the doctrine of Jesus reveals that they understand the ministry of Jesus to be one that emphasized ministering to the poor and outcast over lost souls.⁸² The traditional evangelical church does not deny that much of Jesus' ministry was to the marginalized and the oppressed; however, it refuses to limit the ministry of Jesus to a social agenda.

The Doctrine of the Atonement

The doctrine of atonement is another theological issue that distances the revisionists from the traditional evangelical church. While the penal substitution view of atonement is not the only biblical atonement metaphor used by evangelical Christians,⁸³

⁸¹Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 48. Ward's viewpoint is shared by several revisionist leaders within the emerging church. See Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 94-108; idem, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 110-20; Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 87-97; and Mark Scandrette, Doug Pagitt, and Tony Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 21-32.

⁸²The preaching of McLaren, Bell, and Pagitt focus almost entirely on the oppressed and marginalized while giving very little, if any, attention to the cross. See Rob Bell, "It Stops Here," Mars Hill Bible Church, 27 June 2008 [on-line]; accessed 12 September 2008; available from <http://www.marshill.org/podcasts>; Internet; idem, "Jesus Wants to Save Christians," Mars Hill Bible Church, 10 September 2008 [on-line]; accessed 14 March 2007; available from <http://www.marshill.org/past teachings>; Internet; Brian McLaren, "Adventures in Missing the Point," Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, DC, 22 August 2004 [on-line]; accessed 12 September 2008; available from http://www.crcc/messages/2004/8-22_part-2-adventures-in-missing-the-point; Internet; idem, "The Cross as Prophetic Action, in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*, ed. Mark Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 110-27; Doug Pagitt, "Holy Week," Baylor University Chapel, 08 April 2009 [on-line]; accessed 15 November 2009; available from <http://baylor.edu/media/85806/85806.mp4>; Internet.

⁸³Many evangelicals disagree with the penal substitutionary view of atonement. See Joel Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Bailby and Paul R. Eddy

Schreiner rightfully contends that “penal substitution functions as the anchor and foundation for all other dimensions of the atonement when the Scriptures are considered as a whole.⁸⁴ This theory contends that Christ’s death was penal in that Christ bore the penalty for the sins of those who receive him. Likewise, his death was a substitution in that he died in the place of sinners, receiving the penalty of their sins.⁸⁵

Revisionists are quick to voice their displeasure with penal substitution. Bell, Chalke, and McLaren recoil at the idea that God would pour out his wrath upon his Son. Bell joins the attack against penal substitutionary atonement by offering a view that bypasses the need for repentance and reconciliation. According to Bell, Jesus reconciles all things to God on the cross. Humanity does not need to do anything to receive it; God now accepts them as they are in light of Christ’s reconciling work at the cross.⁸⁶

Chalke has voiced the loudest protest against an atonement that portrays God the Father as pouring out his wrath upon his Son. He argues that such a view of the

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 157-164. Joel Green argues for the Kaleidoscopic view of atonement. This view argues that no one model or metaphor is sufficient to describe the finished work of Christ on the cross. According to Green, God’s saving act is the incarnation, which encompasses all of Jesus’ life, including his death on the cross. This view contends that Jesus’ whole life lived in obedience provides atonement. Green argues that the atonement cannot be limited to one event on the cross. See also Gregory Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Bailby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23-49; and Bruce Reichenbach, “Healing View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Bailby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 117-42,

⁸⁴Thomas Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* ed. James Bailby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 67.

⁸⁵Grudem points out four terms that show how the death of Christ meets the five needs of sinners. First, all deserve to die as a penalty for sin; therefore, Christ died as a sacrifice to pay the penalty. Second, all deserve to bear God’s wrath against sin; therefore, Jesus died as a propitiation for sin to remove God’s wrath. Third, all are separated from God by sin; so, God reconciles man to Himself through Jesus Christ. Fourth, all are in bondage to sin and to the evil one; therefore, Christ provides redemption from sin. Finally, this view presents Christ as bearing the wrath of God towards sin. Grudem states, “As Jesus bore the guilt of our sins alone, God the Father, Mighty Creator, the Lord of the universe, poured out on Jesus the fury of His wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 579)

⁸⁶Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 146.

atonement goes against the very nature of God's love. He sums up his disagreement:

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love.”⁸⁷

Like Chalke, McLaren embraces the love of God in his doctrine of the atonement. Reading the account of Hosea choosing Gomer and then repeatedly taking her back, despite her unfaithfulness, leads McLaren to formulate a theory of atonement in which the action on the cross has nothing to do with penal substitution.

As I developed this message on the ordeal of Hosea, I felt I gained new insight into an important—perhaps essential?—understanding of the cross of Jesus. This understanding takes the question of the cross' significance outside the parameters of penal substitution theory, and in fact outside the parameters of substitutionary atonement theory entirely.⁸⁸

For McLaren, God is not pouring out his wrath upon Christ. Instead, the emphasis is upon God as the victim and friend of sinners. McLaren says, “What if the passion of Christ is something more than a cold legal transaction which somehow balances the injustice in the universe.”⁸⁹ McLaren believes that instead of an angry God who vents his wrath on an innocent victim, God experiences betrayal, torture, abandonment, and broken-heartedness. As Jesus hangs on the cross, McLaren paints a broken-hearted God tortured and abused by mankind but still receiving mankind back no matter how ugly,

⁸⁷Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-83.

⁸⁸Brian D. McLaren, “The Cross As Prophetic Action,” in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*, ed. Mark Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 110.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

how scary, or how sinful.⁹⁰ At the cross, God identifies with sinners and his love takes them back.

The Doctrine of Sin

The most troubling issue surrounding the revisionists' understanding of the doctrine of sin is their questioning of original sin and the total depravity of man. They contend that this understanding of the fall of man creates a concept of original sin that attacks the balance of God's good creation. The difficulty is clearly seen in the words of Steve Chalke:

While we have spent centuries arguing over the doctrine of *original sin*, pouring over the Bible and huge theological tomes to prove the inherent sinfulness of humankind, we have missed a startling point: Jesus believed in *original goodness*. God declared that all his creation, including humankind, was very good. That's not to suggest that Jesus is denying that our relationship with God is in need of reconciliation, but that he is rejecting any idea that we are, somehow, beyond the pale.⁹¹

In Chalke's ardent effort to defend the goodness of humankind, he conveniently leaves out the fact that man sinned in the garden and shattered the perfect goodness he once possessed. God does create man in his own image and declares him "good," however, after the fall of man, Scripture repeatedly attests that the heart of man is evil continually. Jesus asserts vehemently that from the heart of man come "evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, deceit lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evil things come from inside and defile you" (Mark 7:21-23). While

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Chalke and Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 67. This viewpoint on original sin is shared by other revisionists: Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 134-35; idem, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 264-65; Spencer Burke, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 27, Rob Bell, *The Gods Aren't Angry* [DVD] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

Chalke does not deny the fact that the heart of man is evil, he does cast doubt on the belief that man is inherently sinful and in need of redemption.

The primary issue here is whether or not human beings are born as sinful or are essentially morally neutral at birth and are internally corrupted by external forces. While Chalke argues that man is basically good and therefore could not have been born sinful, Scripture tells a different story.

McLaren joins the argument against original sin by indicating that traditional evangelical Christians have taken sin too seriously and are guilty of exaggeration. He agrees that sin is awful and reprehensible, but he argues that the doctrine of the fall has been exaggerated, leading to a loss of the sacredness of God's creation.⁹² He seems to indicate that man is indeed sinful, yet he is not as bad as reformed, evangelical Christians contend. McLaren explains his uneasiness with the doctrine of original sin and the fall:

Many of us have grown uneasy with this understanding of “the fall” (and with it, an exaggerated understanding of the doctrine of “original sin”). We are suspicious that it has become a kind of Western neo-Platonic invasive species that ravages the harmonious balance inherent in the enduring Jewish concept of creation as God's world. So we are looking to the Eastern Orthodox tradition and to emerging narrative theologies where creation is still seen as sacred, “good,” “very good,” and, in fact, ongoing.⁹³

The problem with McLaren's argument is that he is so intent on reviving the view of a good creation that he lessens the impact of sin in order to create this view. McLaren does not support his argument only using Scripture but also searches by looking to various traditions and approaches (e.g., Eastern Orthodox, emerging narrative theologies).

Further, God did create everything good, the fall changed everything. Paul

⁹²McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 264-65.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 265.

describes the nature of God’s creation, in Romans 8:21-22: “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” This does not sound like a creation that is “good”, “very good,” and “on-going.” Rather, it sounds like a creation that is under a curse (Gen 3).

The Doctrine of Salvation

Another major doctrinal issue that marks the revisionists is salvation.

The question is whether Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation and whether salvation exists for people in other religions who do not worship Christ. The traditional evangelical belief is that salvation is found in Jesus Christ, alone. This means that there is no possibility of salvation for those of other religions who do not receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. Revisionists see the issue differently. McLaren views the gospel message that people are lost without Christ and must make an individual decision to receive Christ as divisive. He fears that it divides the body of Christ because it excludes those who do not believe. In fact, McLaren opens the door wide for universalism:

I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus *and* remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts. This will be hard, you say, and I agree. But frankly, it’s not at all easy to be a follower of Jesus in many “Christian” religious contexts, either.⁹⁴

The idea that individual unbelievers will face a literal judgment and then be cast into a lake of fire where they will endure eternal punishment is troublesome for McLaren. He cannot accept that view of Scripture. The idea of eternal punishment of those who do not receive Jesus as Savior contradicts McLaren’s theory of a missional ministry in which the

⁹⁴Ibid., 293.

purpose of the believer is to be a blessing to others. McLaren further asserts,

Jesus did *not* come to make some people saved and others condemned. Jesus did *not* come to help some people be right while leaving everyone else to be wrong. Jesus did *not* come to create another exclusive religion—Judaism having been exclusive based on genetics, and Christianity being exclusive based on beliefs (which can be a tougher requirement than genetics!).⁹⁵

McLaren fails to consider that Jesus did not come to condemn anyone, but, as the Gospel of John states, “[H]e who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). McLaren evidently sees this statement as an intolerant and exclusivist view of salvation. He does not like options when it comes to the doctrine of salvation:

This is how I feel when I am offered a choice between the roads of exclusivism (only confessing Christians go to heaven), universalism (everyone goes to heaven), and inclusivism (Christians go to heaven, plus at least some others). Each road takes you somewhere, to a place with some advantages and disadvantages, but none of them is the road of my missional calling: blessed in this life to be a blessing to everyone on earth.⁹⁶

In keeping with the main goal of the revisionist leaders within the emerging church, McLaren cannot accept an exclusivist view of salvation because it does not help his cause in connecting with the postmodern generation. McLaren is not concerned with who is going to heaven and who is not. His focus is on being blessed and being a blessing to others.⁹⁷

Bell echoes McLaren’s sentiments. Bell is critical of those who evangelize, preferring that believers would simply be a blessing to others. He writes, “God chooses

⁹⁵McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 120.

⁹⁶Ibid., 123.

⁹⁷Ibid., 124.

people to be used to bless other people God blesses everybody.”⁹⁸ Bell believes that one must simply live their life in the blessed reality that is theirs as a result of Jesus’ reconciliation of all people. This approach to salvation offers a faith that demands no belief in any certain doctrine, no change in lifestyle, and no saving faith in Jesus Christ. One needs only to see the reality of their blessedness.

The Doctrine of Hell

A final theological issue that separates the revisionists and the traditional evangelical Christians is the doctrine of hell. Hell is generally viewed by traditional evangelical Christians as being “a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.”⁹⁹

Some revisionists within the emerging church view hell as present realities in society such as poverty, envy, oppression, and hatred.¹⁰⁰ Others choose to avoid discussing the doctrine or affirm that all but those who willingly choose hell will enter heaven. Even those who choose hell, argue these revisionists, will be given a second chance.¹⁰¹

McLaren’s view of hell is an attempt to avoid the extremes of universalism in

⁹⁸Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 165.

⁹⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1148. Numerous texts attest to the eternal punishment that exists in hell. For example, in Matthew 25:41, Jesus states that the king will say to some, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Jesus further declares that “those so condemned will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:46).

¹⁰⁰Rob Bell, “Jesus Wants To Save Christians Part Three: Hell,” Mars Hill Bible Church, 24 September 2006 [on-line]; accessed 14 November 2008; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings>; Internet.

¹⁰¹Brian D. McLaren, “Brian McLaren’s Inferno 2: Are We Asking The Wrong Questions About Hell?” 08 May 2006; [on-line]; accessed on 10 March 2010; available from http://www.outofur.com/archives/2006/05/brian_mclarens_1.html; Internet.

which everyone goes to heaven and traditional exclusivism which holds that unless one explicitly accepts and follows Jesus, one is excluded from eternal life with God and destined for hell.¹⁰² According to McLaren, when one concerns one's self with questions of hell and where they will spend eternity they are asking the wrong questions. McLaren gives the clearest presentation of his view of hell in his book, *The Last Word and the Word After That*. Here, he discusses various views of hell using the various characters in his book. For example he uses the character, Neo, to sum up the traditional view of hell with biting sarcasm, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, we say, and he'll fry your butt in hell forever unless you do or believe the right thing. God is a loving father, we say, but he'll treat you with a cruelty no human father has ever been guilty of, eternal conscious torment."¹⁰³

McLaren cannot accept the fact that God would create people knowing that the vast majority, will spend eternity in hell. For McLaren, this does not compute with the God of justice that he knows. Thus, he states that he believes some people will go to a literal hell only after having been given a choice. Based on 1 Peter 3:19, McLaren argues that Scripture attests to the fact that people will be given a second chance after death to choose heaven over hell.¹⁰⁴ McLaren contends that Jesus is not concerned with who was in or who was out, but he is primarily focused on ethical issues.¹⁰⁵ Thus, in McLaren's view, one should focus more on ethical behavior and less on eternal destinations.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That*, 75.

¹⁰⁴Brian D. McLaren, "Brian McLaren's Inferno: The Provocative Church Leader Explains his View of Hell," 05 May 2006 [on-line]; accessed 01 March 2010; available from http://www.outofur.com/archives/2006/05/brian_mclarens.html; Internet.

¹⁰⁵McLaren, "Brian McLaren's Inferno 2."

Another example of the revisionist view of hell is that offered by Spencer Burke. Burke identifies himself as a universalist who believes in hell. By this statement, he means that God's grace is such that he allows everyone to enter heaven. He believes that hell is not assigned to us by God; it is a choice one makes when one rejects his grace.¹⁰⁶ Burke contends that the gracious God with whom he is connected does not assign anyone to hell. However, Burke asserts that there could be some who would reject this offer of grace and, therefore, forfeit heaven.

How Revisionists Misunderstand Truth and Authority

Each of these doctrinal issues that separate the revisionists from the traditional evangelical church flows from a misunderstanding of truth and authority. For example, the issue of Scripture is directly related to the issues of truth and authority. Revisionists call into question the truth and authority of Scripture when they view Scripture as only one of several authorities and, in the case of Pagitt, not even the primary authority. These revisionists also see truth as existing within the life experiences of the community; it is their truths that determine the truths of Scripture.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, some revisionists believe that the interpretation of Scripture is dependent upon the composition of their community.¹⁰⁸ This approach displaces the authority of the biblical text and recreates truth.

The revisionists' perspective on Jesus also flows from a misunderstanding of

¹⁰⁶Spencer Burke, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 200.

¹⁰⁷Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 159-69.

¹⁰⁸This thought is demonstrated by both Conder in his community hermeneutic and Pagitt in his progressional dialogue. See Conder and Rhodes, *Free For All* and Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

truth. They redefine the truth of Scripture when they emphasize only the humanity of Jesus. The revisionists' presentation of a Jesus who focuses his ministry on the marginalized and oppressed omits the cross and what God accomplished for humanity through it. While some may consider this a simple case of emphasizing the humanity of Jesus over his deity, the revisionist preachers avoid the cross altogether. Such an omission is not only a reduced emphasis on the nature and work of Jesus, but a denial of the truth of the finished work of Christ.

McLaren's understanding of salvation is clearly a redefinition of truth and a displacement of authority. He refuses to embrace the view of salvation clearly expressed in Scripture, namely, that people who are lost without Christ must make an individual decision to receive him. In other words, since some people do not accept this message, one cannot proclaim it to them because they do not see it as true.

Like the theological issues already mentioned, revisionists' views of the atonement and hell also flow from a misunderstanding of truth and authority. For example, concerning atonement, while there are many divergent views on the atonement, revisionist leaders not only deny penal substitutionary atonement, they rarely even mention the atoning work of Jesus. Rather than emphasize the atonement, these revisionist leaders focus their attention on the ethical teachings of Jesus and one's need to care for God's creation. Since their doctrine of Jesus focuses on the social aspects of his ministry, revisionist leaders preach more on social issues than the finished work of Christ on the cross. This represents a misunderstanding of the truth of Scripture when each of the four gospels provides a clear picture of the atoning work of Jesus. Finally, the doctrine of hell becomes a matter of preference for revisionists. Since McLaren, for

instance, does not like the concept of hell, he repaints the doctrine, offering various optional views of hell to compete with the biblical view.

Conclusion

The revisionist leaders within the emerging church demonstrate a consistency of thought and practice with postmodernism. This postmodern influence is demonstrated most notably in their views on truth. They follow the direction of postmodern thinkers in questioning all truth claims, while leaning heavily on relativism. Since they hold truth claims in question, both postmoderns and revisionists choose to address the issue of truth using stories. Storytelling is seen as the way one addresses reality, retelling events through their own unique perspective. The use of stories replaces the metanarrative or grand story that explains everything. Postmoderns and revisionists alike use the mini-narratives of each community to explain truth.

The revisionists' hesitancy to accept universal truths also leads to their acceptance of pluralism. Postmodern philosophers like Rescher argue that all truth is shaped by culture. Therefore, truth can vary from culture to culture and from circumstance to circumstance, giving rise to a pluralistic outlook. This view of truth is demonstrated in the sermons of many of the revisionist preachers.

Another influence of postmodernism on the revisionist leaders is deconstruction. Revisionists do not accept the meaning of the biblical text at face value. Instead, they rework the text or step outside the text completely to arrive at a meaning nowhere found in Scripture. McLaren's approach to the issue of hell is a perfect example of this methodology. He cannot accept the view of hell given in the biblical text, so he rejects the intended meaning of the author, recreating a new meaning that he finds more

satisfying.

The revisionists' divergence from tradition is further seen in their theological beliefs. Their misguided understanding of several key Christian doctrines is of great concern to those who seek to preach biblically. These leaders are not merely changing the methods to reach postmodern hearers. They are completely reworking several key doctrines. Revisionist leaders hold highly questionable viewpoints concerning the doctrines of Scripture, Jesus, penal substitutionary atonement, salvation, sin, and hell. In an attempt to embrace postmodernism, these revisionist leaders have allowed the truths of Scripture to slip through their fingers, leaving them holding nothing but empty promises.

Preaching in the midst of a pluralist society, the revisionist preachers attempt to accommodate today's culture by repainting the doctrines of Scripture. In doing so, these revisionists leave the interpretation of the biblical text up to the community. They have exchanged the authority of God's Word for popular opinion and are thus left with no clear word from God.

CHAPTER 4

TRUTH AND THE EMERGING CHURCH

One of the most significant problems among the revisionist leaders of the emerging church is their handling of truth. When it comes to preaching, the source of truth is of utmost importance. If the role of the preacher is to communicate the truth to the listening community, then the preacher must have a firm grasp of its source and meaning.

The revisionists follow the pattern of postmodernism in their attempts to arrive at truth. This fact is duly noted in the writings of Brian McLaren. He articulates a theology in which a “new Christianity” develops from “an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality; on experience over against truth.”¹ This “new kind of Christian” that McLaren writes about is in fact a postmodern Christian. His new type of faith is one that embraces the postmodern mindset and demurs propositions and certainties.

David Wells sums up the postmodern condition well: “The postmodern culture inclines people to see the world as if it had been stripped of its structures of meaning, of its morality, of any viable worldview which is universal, and it collapses all of reality into

¹D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

the self. It eats away at every vestige of meaning for which people grasp.”² This culture is prevalent revisionists are mimicking much of this postmodern mindset in their approach to truth and meaning. Instead of using the Word of God as a grid for truth, the postmodern culture and experience have become the grid through which Scripture is interpreted. Postmoderns argue that truth cannot be found.³ When, in reality they just do not want to accept the truth that they encounter.

The issue of truth is a very significant one for the Christian and hinges on two distinct questions. The first is the ontological question: what truth is. The second is the epistemological question: how we know truth. For evangelicals, God’s revealed truth is objective in that truth has a corresponding relationship between a proposition and how things are in reality, regardless of anyone’s acceptance of the propositions.⁴ However, there are some who question the ability to be objective at all. They hold that no one can be truly objective because no one is neutral or unbiased. For example, Tony Jones believes that no one can be objective when it comes to interpretation.⁵ R. Scott Smith states that “if we cannot know objective truths as they are, but only from the standpoint of

²David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 194.

³Some postmoderns embrace a coherence theory of truth, while still others hold to a pragmatic view. The coherence theory of truth states that a set of two or more beliefs are said to cohere if each member of the set is consistent with any subset of the others and each is implied by all of the others. See Richard L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 104. The pragmatic theory of truth starts with the presupposition that truth does not reside in a specific idea or belief, but truth happens to that idea in the process of verification. Since there is no bearing of truth in the idea, proponents believe that truth could vary depending on the standpoint of the one who holds the belief. These theories make truth a matter of the relationship between various truth bearers rather than its relations to reality. See William James, “The Meaning of Truth” in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3-4.

⁴R. Scott Smith, “Emergents, Evangelicals and the Importance of Truth,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009), 130.

⁵Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 74.

our biases, interests, etc., then inevitably we cannot ‘transcend’ our interpretations of those truths and arrive at knowing the pristine, unadulterated truths of how reality actually is.”⁶ Smith argues that while one may maintain that there are objective truths one arrives at through one’s biases and interests, they in effect become what one interprets them to be.⁷ When this happens one’s epistemology drives the ontology, which is contrary to the evangelical view that in Scripture God has revealed objective truth that can be known.⁸

One can hear the tenor of the revisionists as they open the conversation for the varied “truths” that are being constructed along the journey they call faith. This journey is one with as many twists as there are opinions of what is true in a given circumstance, community, or experience. During this revisionist journey, revisionists construct truth as they go. While revisionists recognize Scripture as a source of authority, they believe that truth becomes apparent in the life experiences and circumstances of the community.⁹

In contrast, many evangelicals would affirm a critical realist view of truth that corresponds to some variety of metaphysical realism.¹⁰ Critical realism argues that “truth precedes reality, and it may be known fairly accurately. While man’s knowledge of truth

⁶R. Scott Smith, “Emergents, Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth, 131.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹This understanding of truth is acknowledged by various revisionist leaders. For more information, see Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 39; idem, *Church Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 159; Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 325-31.

¹⁰Many evangelicals embrace a correspondence theory of truth. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 136. The correspondence theory contends that a belief is true because it corresponds to or expresses that which exists independently of our thoughts. The basic tenet of this theory is that if one has a belief or idea of purity or goodness, then there must be something similar to that concept that actually exists in reality to which one’s beliefs correspond. For more information on the correspondence theory of truth see Richard L. Kirkham, “Correspondence Theory of Truth,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig, vol. 9 (London: Routledge, 1998), 473-74.

is limited, that which man does know is a close approximation.”¹¹ Unlike the constructivist epistemology, critical realism contends that truth does not depend on mankind’s perceptions. Truth exists prior to our perception of it. Steve Lemke explains:

Anyone who believes in biblical inerrancy and a high view of biblical inspiration would also consistently confirm that truth is revealed. We know the truths of Scripture not because we created them, but because God did. God revealed His truths to us primarily through the books of Scripture (and the incarnation of Jesus Christ), but also in the book of nature. Truth (and reality) thus precede(s) our knowing it. Truth is independent of human perceptions and beliefs. Truth is not created by the knower, but exists prior to our knowing it.¹²

Biblical Understanding of Truth

John MacArthur defines truth as “the unchanged and unchanging expression of who God is.”¹³ He understands truth as that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, being, and most importantly, the self-expression of God.¹⁴ MacArthur rightly states, “The issue of truth is inextricably bound to God. God is the source of all that exists, therefore, attempts to define truth in nonbiblical terms inevitably fail.”¹⁵ Not only is God the source of all that exists, but he is also the ultimate revealer of all truth. Scripture attests to the fact that every truth revealed in nature was authored by God (Ps 19:1-6). Mankind can comprehend this truth because God also gave us minds to enable us to comprehend the truth he reveals, as well as a basic understanding of his law written

¹¹Steve M. Lemke, “Truth for a Postmodern Era: Or, Truth Is Not as Strange as Postmodernism Makes It Out to Be” (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 18, 2005), 4.

¹²Ibid., 5.

¹³John MacArthur, *Truth Wars: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), xx.

¹⁴Ibid., 2.

¹⁵Ibid., xviii.

on our hearts (Rom 2:14-15). God also gave us the infallible truth of Scripture (Ps 19:7-11), which is a sufficient revelation of everything that pertains to life and godliness (2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Pet 1:3).¹⁶

The fact that truth is bound up in the character and nature of God is further elucidated by Wayne Grudem when he states, “God’s truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both pure and the final standard of truth.”¹⁷ This statement means that God is the true God above all other so-called gods. This truth is attested in numerous places in Scripture (Deut 4:32-40; Jer 10:10-11; John 17:3; 1 John 5:20). The truthfulness of God also testifies to the fact that all of God’s knowledge is true and is the final standard of truth. Job records that God is “perfect in knowledge” (Job 37:16). Grudem declares, “to say that God knows all things and that his knowledge is perfect is to say that he is never mistaken in his perception or understanding of the world: all that he knows and thinks is a correct understanding of the nature of reality.”¹⁸ Thus, one can see how truth is inextricably bound to God.

From a biblical perspective, truth is recognized as being that which corresponds to reality. For example, when Jesus’ opponents sought to kill him because he claimed to be equal with God (John 5:18), Jesus argued that he was who he claimed to be by appealing to the testimony of John the Baptist: “He has borne witness to the truth” (John 5:33). In addition, many people testified to the words spoken by John about Jesus:

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 195.

¹⁸Ibid.

“Everything that John said about this man was true (John 10:44).¹⁹ Both Jesus and the witnesses present declared that the words John spoke concerning the person of Jesus Christ corresponded to reality. Wells sums up the obvious correspondence between what is said and recorded and what actually occurs in the biblical text when he writes,

In each of these cases, the meaning is unmistakable. There is a correspondence between what Jesus claimed about himself, or was said about him, and what was actually the case. There is a correspondence between everything John the Baptist said in his prophetic role of revealing the identity of Jesus and who Jesus actually was. There is a correspondence between what the apostle John recorded and what really happened. And there is a correspondence between what he had been teaching and what is actually the case.²⁰

As one continues to look at the issue of truth in the biblical text, one discovers that the ultimate standard of truth is the Word of God. When Jesus offers his high priestly prayer for his disciples in John 17 he prays to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth” (John 17:17). Grudem points out an interesting fact about the use of the word “truth” in this verse. He notes that Jesus does not use the adjective for truth when he says, “Your word is truth.” Instead, he uses the noun, *αληθεια*, to say that God’s Word is not simply, “true, but it is truth itself.”²¹ Therefore, the Bible is the ultimate standard of truth, the grid by which everything one encounters should be filtered. In this approach to truth, those assertions that conform to the truth revealed in Scripture are deemed to be true, while those that do not are false. The Bible is God’s Word and God’s Word is the ultimate definition of what is true.

While Scripture does not teach a particular theory of truth, the biblical authors

¹⁹David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 81.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 82.

²¹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 83.

wrote the text with a correspondence theory of truth in mind. They were not simply presenting views they thought were true because they worked better than others (pragmatic), nor were they claiming to hold their beliefs about the life of Christ because these beliefs matched beliefs they already possessed (coherence). Instead, they claimed what they testified corresponded to what actually occurred.²² For example, when John appealed to tangible eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus (1 John 1:1-3) and Peter and John testified to the high priests what they had heard and seen, they were providing evidence that what they reported actually corresponded to that which was the case (Acts 4:19-20).²³ One does an injustice to the biblical text when one attempts to assess its truthfulness with a theory of truth, other than the correspondence theory.

The picture of truth presented in the Bible is vastly different from an ever-changing concept that flows from the cultural stream. The Gospel of John speaks boldly in opposition to the view that truth is constructed and reconstructed as we go along our journey. Wells notes,

When Jesus claimed he was “equal with God” (John 5:18), he defended his argument with the testimony of John the Baptist: “he has borne witness to the truth” (John 5:33). Later, many people said, “everything that John said about this man was true” (John 10:41). When John ends his account he declares that he has given witness to what has happened, “and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24).”²⁴

In the passages that Well’s alludes to there is a correspondence between what Jesus claimed about himself or was said about him and what was actually true. All that

²²John S. Feinberg, “Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, & the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preuss (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984), 18.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 81.

John the Baptist said about the identity of Jesus corresponded with who he actually was. Furthermore, everything John recorded corresponded with what actually occurred.²⁵ Truth, as revealed in Scripture, corresponds to reality. The biblical perspective of truth leaves no room for a notion of truth that is constructed to meet the immediate circumstances, nor does it leave room for a notion of truth that finds its accuracy in a set of gathered ideas with which it coheres.

The Trinitarian Foundation of Truth

The God who speaks is the creator God who spoke the world into existence. All of reality was created by him. The truth that exists in the world is the truth that is spoken by God in his Word. The truth which is revealed in God's Word is often put in terms of propositions. A proposition is a statement that makes a declaration. Propositional statements are not made true simply by one thinking or expressing them. Nor are they made true by our ability to determine they are. As Moreland states, "Evidence allows us to tell if a proposition is true or false, but reality (the way the world is) is what *makes* a proposition true or false."²⁶

God speaks through his written Word those truths that lead to belief. Christ embodies this truth and fleshes it out for the world to see. He makes tangible those propositions that one discovers in the Word. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ one sees the correspondence between the truth bearer (propositional statements) and the reality demonstrated in his person. This correspondence between the written Word and reality is seen in the dual authorship of Scripture. The Holy Spirit inspires the

²⁵Ibid., 82.

²⁶Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 136.

biblical authors to write the biblical text and also illuminates the hearts and minds of man so that he can understand the truth revealed.

Even though one believes the propositions of the Bible, that belief does not equal truth. Propositions are not true because someone acknowledges belief in them. They are true because they correspond to reality. In other words, the propositional statements in God's Word are true whether anyone believes them or not. One may argue that this argument for truth is only convincing for the one who acknowledges the Bible as true. However, it does not matter how one views the Bible. The truthfulness of the Word of God is determined by the nature of God. Since God is Truth and the Word is spoken by God, then God's Word is true. Therefore, even though there are realities that the Bible speaks of that one cannot see, their truthfulness is confirmed in that the God who created reality attests to these realities in his Word.

The Revisionists' Understanding of Truth

When it comes to truth, the revisionists' view is one that focuses on their perceived uncertainty of truth and the belief that truth is to be found in one's shared beliefs and experiences with their community. The revisionist leaders believe that one can redefine truth to meet the particular situation they find themselves in.²⁷ This philosophy of truth is evident in the rhetoric of McLaren, Pagitt, and Bell. They believe that what makes something true is whether it helps one deal with one's experiences. For example, McLaren's skewed view of truth is seen in his comments concerning homosexuality:

²⁷ This sentiment is echoed by Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt in their respective writings, as previously attested in this work.

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say, "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us." That alienates us from both the liberals and the conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat our gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where the lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.²⁸

McLaren labors over this argument because of the tension present between the biblical prohibition and the contemporary practice of homosexual behavior. He cannot bring himself to give a clear answer because of the difficulty it would cause in various communities. One wonders why McLaren refers to the biblical arguments against homosexuality as nuanced and multilayered when they are straight forward prohibitions. His dilemma, moreover is how the community will receive the truth, not what Scripture teaches. While the truth of the biblical text is apparent, it does not work for the revisionists' mindset, so a different truth is created.

These revisionist leaders also embrace a pluralistic notion of truth by utilizing conversations that allow numerous individuals to share their perspectives on truth. McLaren articulates this mindset in *A Generous Orthodoxy* a book that espouses a very inclusive orthodoxy.²⁹ Another revisionist leader who espouses a pluralistic view of truth is Doug Pagitt. His progressional dialogue method of preaching encourages an approach to the biblical text that lends itself to pluralism. Within his style of preaching, "the following elements need to be present in some amount: dialogue, immersion in the story

²⁸Brian D. McLaren, "Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response," in *Leadership Journal Blog*, January 23, 2006 [on-line]; accessed 15 September 2006; available from http://www.log.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html; Internet.

²⁹McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 34.

(the Bible, the world, and people's lives), listening, experimentation, disagreement, and openness to others."³⁰ The story from which the message originates has three components: the Bible, the world, and people's lives. For Pagitt, truth is not necessarily rooted in Scripture but in the lives of those gathered, as well as within the world in which one lives. He recommends the use of provisional statements such as, "It seems to me" and "As I understand it."³¹ Pagitt believes these phrases make room for the thoughts and experiences of others. He explains his method of preaching as a group facilitation. Pagitt notes that he never knows where things are going until he gets started. People share ideas, thoughts, and opinions on the biblical text throughout the service and the line of thought will often take tangents.³² For Pagitt, progressional dialogue provides the opportunity to access truth that lies within each individual, truth that changes from time to time and place to place.

Pagitt further describes his faith community's approach to truth, noting that they run their ideas through a series of questions to determine whether they are true: "Does it fit with my experience in the world? Does it match what I already know to be reliable? Does it connect with the way I would like things to be? Does it fit with what I believe to be possible?"³³ These questions reveal that for Pagitt's faith community, truth is determined by their life experiences, their preferences, and whether or not a notion of

³⁰Pagitt, *Preaching Reimagined*, 39.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 39-40. Pagitt's openness to his listeners opinions is evident in a conversation I had with him at a conference in Jeffersonville, IN. I asked him what happens during his progressional dialogue when someone shares a thought or idea about Scripture that is wrong. He chuckled and said, "You are assuming there is a wrong answer." Doug Pagitt, interview by author, Jeffersonville, IN, 11 September 2005.

³³Pagitt, *Church Reimagined*, 159.

truth will work. Pagitt believes that truth is developed when the faith community intertwines their ideas, understandings, and hopes with the story of God as its own story unfolds. One sees tendencies of relativism, coherentism, and pragmatism in Pagitt's approach to truth.

In similar fashion, Bell believes the church needs to keep reforming. He makes it clear that he is not referring to merely adding better lighting and music, cool graphics, and new methods. Bell maintains the church needs to keep reforming theology.³⁴ In Bell's interview with Andy Crouch he questions assumptions made about the Bible itself and desires to embrace the mystery rather than figure it out.³⁵ In his approach to truth, Bell seeks to tame the truth of the biblical text until it fits his faith community's understanding of truth.

According to emerging church leaders, one cannot even experience reality without first interpreting it. These leaders deny that one can know reality directly or immediately. For them, all truth must be viewed through the grid of our life experiences, beliefs, opinions, and traditions before one can accept it as truth. Tony Jones, one of the revisionists within the emerging church believes that one cannot attain objective truth from the Scriptures because it is impossible to get an objective reading of the text.³⁶

R. Scott Smith states that all access to truth requires interpretation: "If we believe we have access to reality only through our interpretation, such that all access requires interpretation, I am afraid we cannot avoid silencing God's Spirit."³⁷ According

³⁴Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

³⁵Andy Crouch "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 38.

³⁶Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 74.

³⁷R. Scott Smith, "'Emergents,' Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth," 143.

to the revisionists' argument, none of God's revelation can be perceived without prior interpretation.³⁸ If this were the case, the only reality that would exist, and thus the only truth that would be knowable is that which one constructs for himself.

Smith points out the error of this view of truth on biblical grounds:

Consider Saul of Tarsus, whose conceptual scheme was that of a "Pharisee of Pharisees." When Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road, who or what, did he experience? If all experience is a conceptualization, then Saul could not have experienced Him *as* Lord; that concept was not even possible in his conceptual scheme. But the text indicates that Saul was radically, even instantly, changed from a persecutor into a Christ follower, and the best explanation for that is what he claimed—that Jesus Himself appeared directly to him. This strongly suggests that God can reveal truth directly to us.³⁹

Smith notes that other Scriptures also indicate that God can reveal truth directly to mankind. For example, in Psalms one reads, "[T]he word of God enlightens the eyes" (Ps 19:8b), and in Hebrews, "[T]he word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword and it is able to judge all our thoughts and intentions" (Heb 4:12).⁴⁰ Likewise, in 1 Samuel 16, God reveals to Samuel who he has chosen to be anointed as king over Israel. Samuel has to listen to God's voice as God makes known his choice for king. Smith notes that if Samuel could know only his conceptions of God's choice as king, how could God make his choice clear to Samuel?⁴¹ If we cannot experience reality directly, as the revisionists argue, then this implies that God is limited and is unable to reveal to us truth as it really is.

Another example of revisionist interpretation of truth is seen in McLaren's

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 142-43.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 143.

understanding of deconstruction. McLaren explains,

Deconstruction is not destructive; it is hope. It arises from the belief that sometimes, our constructed laws get in the way of unseen justice, our undeconstructed words get in the way of communication, our institutions get in the way of the purposes for which they were constructed, our formulations get in the way of meaning, our curricula get in the way of learning. In those cases, one must deconstruct laws, words, institutions, formulations, or curricula in the hope that something better will appear once the constructions-become-obstructions have been taken apart. The love of what is hidden, as yet unseen, and hoped for gives one courage to deconstruct what is seen and familiar.⁴²

For McLaren, the concept of hell as taught in the biblical text is not palatable; therefore, he deconstructs it to arrive at a more convenient truth.

The problem with deconstructing the biblical text as McLaren advises is that one is approaching the text with the understanding that there is something convoluted and obstructive about the meaning inherent in the text. The very notion that the biblical text needs to be deconstructed calls into question both its inspiration and sufficiency.

Deconstruction of Scripture also represents a desire to deny the intended meaning of the biblical author and allow the reader to become the determiner of meaning. Such a move is a disastrous step away from the sole authority of Scripture.

Another perspective on truth is given by noted theologian John Franke. He is one of the unofficial theologians of the emerging church.⁴³ Franke attempts to ground plurality in the nature of the Trinity, arguing that each member of the Trinity is a distinct

⁴²Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005), xvii. McLaren offers a special thanks to John Caputo for this understanding of deconstruction; see John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

⁴³John Franke along with the late Stanley Grenz presented their case for moving beyond foundationalism and allowing the Spirit to speak anew through the community of faith. This methodology has been practiced within the emerging church by McLaren, Pagitt, and Bell. See Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Franke also was a featured speaker at 2008 Emergent Theological Conversation, 22-24 October 2008 in Kansas City, MO.

entity. Franke contends that Jesus is the truth but only as a result of his relationship with the Father. He believes that the truth Jesus possesses is by virtue of his relationship with the Father. Likewise, he contends that Jesus' truth is in relation to the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ For Franke, the Spirit is the truth because the Spirit leads the world to Jesus who is truth. The relationship between the members of the Trinity helps one understand the nature and character of the truth revealed in Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

The early church, Franke contends, responded to the challenge of grasping the reality of the Trinity in a way that would reflect their understandings by placing an emphasis on both the unity and plurality of God. While not acknowledging three gods, they could not deny the unique experiences they had with each one. The church arrived at a conclusion, according to Franke, that emphasized a plurality of truth as revealed by the plurality of God.⁴⁶

Franke contends that God's purpose is fulfilled as the various representations of the body of Christ each interpret the truth in their own way and thus provide a fuller representation of God's message.⁴⁷ Franke believes that a more complete picture of truth is demonstrated when the body of Christ, in all its diversity, represents the message of the gospel.

One of the major problems with Franke's perspective on pluralism is that he

⁴⁴John Franke, *Manifold Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 44-45. This approach to truth is also embraced by McLaren and Pagitt. See McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 32-45; Pagitt, *Church Reimagined*. This book by Pagitt shows how the faith community incorporates their shared beliefs, ideas, and life experiences to form their understanding of belief and truth.

⁴⁵Ibid., 45.

⁴⁶Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷Ibid., 50-51.

bases it on what he refers to as the plurality of the Trinity. He claims that each member of the Trinity exists as totally separate and different from the other. Although Scripture testifies to the distinct persons of the Trinity, their unity is also expressed throughout. The Holy Spirit is referred to throughout as the Spirit of God. Jesus, at various times, shared with his followers that if they had seen him, they had seen the Father.

Another area where Franke demonstrates his understanding of plurality is in his understanding of the interpretation of the Bible. He answers the question of how to embrace pluralism and still maintain the integrity of Scripture by stating that the Holy Spirit not only inspired the canon, but continues to inspire communities of faith, giving them new meaning for their specific communities. Franke explains,

Put another way, the goal of reading the Bible is not the attempt to identify and codify the true meaning of the text in a series of systematically arranged assertions that then function as the only proper interpretive grid through which we read the Bible. Such an approach is characteristic among those who hold particular approaches to theology and hermeneutics in an absolutist fashion and claim that such procedures will lead to the arrival of one true and proper conception of doctrine contained in Scripture. *The danger here is that such a procedure can hinder our ability to read the text and listen to the speaking of the Spirit in new ways.*⁴⁸

Franke's understanding of Scriptures shows that he does not believe that the meaning of Scripture is fixed. Instead, he believes people read the Bible and trust the Holy Spirit will lead them into some new meaning. He questions the importance of the authorial intent of the biblical text and contends that the Holy Spirit provides new meaning to the texts for differing communities throughout the ages. The new meaning they receive within their community, then, may or may not coincide with the message of Scripture. In such a scenario, the community becomes a significant source of meaning.

⁴⁸Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 84, emphasis mine.

Conclusion

The source of truth is of paramount importance to biblical preaching. When one begins with the assumption that there is no universal truth or that truth cannot be determined, one loses his basis for proclaiming the gospel message. While philosophers continue to debate over the meaning of truth, the church must approach the Word of God as the revealed truth of God that directly corresponds to that which exists in reality. The Bible attests to the fact that truth is spoken by God the Father, demonstrated in the Son who saves, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, truth is revealed in Scripture to correspond to the actual events that take place in real time. Truth is not created by mankind. Truth exists because it is revealed by a trinitarian God.

When revisionists attempt to connect with the postmodern culture by recreating truth, the connection that is made is not the gospel proclaimed in Scripture. One cannot adopt an approach to truth that is constantly fluctuating and still proclaim a biblical message that is anchored in the truth of God's Word. When the revisionists approach truth with a mindset that they are the creators and determiners of truth, they hinder their ability to preach biblically. As determiners of truth, revisionists no longer allow the Word exclusively to speak truth into their lives.

Since truth finds its origin in God, it exists independently of man's thoughts, ideas, and preferences. If preachers desire to proclaim the biblical truth of the gospel to the postmodern culture of today, they must not redefine the gospel to match the uncertainties and doubts of the culture. The postmodern culture will be reached with the gospel when Scripture is proclaimed with integrity and passion, when they rely on the God who speaks, point to the Son who saves, and trust in the Holy Spirit illuminates

hearts and minds. Truth does not conform to error and uncertainty; truth depicts reality as it actually exists. Jesus echoes this reality when he tells his disciples, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

Truth is not elusive, nor is it ever-changing and elastic. Truth is firmly established in the theological framework of the Trinity and God’s revelation of himself to humanity through creation, his Word, his Spirit, and finally through the foolishness of preaching Scripture. The preaching event hinges on the reliability of the truthfulness of God’s written Word. The revisionists’ approach to truth cannot adequately represent the truth revealed in Scripture. Franke’s desire to see pluralism as God’s method of utilizing the body of Christ to spread the gospel is faulty from its core. He grounds his approach on a pluralistic understanding of the Trinity and a skepticism of the exclusive role of the human authors who penned the biblical text.

When truth is redefined and the gospel message is recreated to meet the existing beliefs of the faith community, their preferences, or life experiences, then the message proclaimed no longer echoes the voice of God. Instead of proclaiming the Word written by God, one is left to proclaim the presuppositions and ideas of the ever-changing culture. In this case, truth becomes an ever-changing entity defined by the life experiences of the hearers.

CHAPTER 5

AUTHORITY WITHIN THE EMERGING CHURCH

Similar to truth, the issue of authority is of great significance in critiquing the preaching of the emerging church. This study proposes that not only does the preaching of the revisionists within the emerging church redefine truth, but it also displaces the authority of the Bible. This displacement threatens to sterilize the proclamation of the gospel, putting it on par with the thoughts, opinions, and preferences of various church traditions, cultural customs, and individual life experiences. In an attempt to listen to the voice of the postmodern culture, the emerging church is in grave danger of missing the voice of God.

Defining Authority

If the preacher is going to proclaim the gospel, then he must have a clear understanding of the authority of God's Word. The biblical terms used for preaching make it abundantly clear that the power and authority in preaching come from the content of the biblical message and not from the preacher. Therefore, one must first determine what is meant by authority.

Authority is defined as “a power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior.”¹ Jesus taught in such a way that people responded when he spoke. In fact, it

¹*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “authority.”

was said of him that “ he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:29). Furthermore, Paul encourages Timothy to “preach the word: be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). Here, Timothy is told to preach the Word in such a manner that it commands a change in behavior, opinion, and thought. Jesus, also, when he was tempted by Satan invoked the highest authority against him by stating, “It is written” (Matt 4) in reference to the Scriptures. He knew they had the power to command behavior.

While some revisionists refuse to allow the Bible to be the sole authority for their lives, Gadamer contends that there can be an authority that exerts obedience over another when that authority possesses a superior knowledge. He writes,

It is true that authority is necessary in order to be able to command and find obedience. But this proceeds only from the authority that a person has. Even the anonymous and impersonal authority of a superior which derives from the command is not ultimately based on this order, but is what makes it possible. Here also its true basis is an act of freedom and reason, which fundamentally acknowledges the authority of a superior because he has a wider view of things or is better informed, ie [sic] once again, because he has superior knowledge.²

The Word of God, then, is not authoritative simply because it is a command to be obeyed, but because it is the Word of God that speaks. God, who speaks through the Bible, possesses a knowledge that is superior to all of humanity. Therefore, his Word is authoritative.

Elwell summarizes well the role of Scripture, ”They [Scriptures] reveal God’s transcendent will in objective, written form, and are the rules of faith and conduct through

²Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 248.

which Christ exercises his divine authority over the lives of Christians.”³ The authority present in Scripture acknowledges that God expresses His will through His Word, which then impacts the hearer, thus exercising the authority of God in their lives. Biblical authority transforms behaviors, opinions and thoughts.

Biblical Basis

The concept of biblical authority finds its basis in the same trinitarian foundation as that of preaching: the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates. Chapell rightly states, “The claim of Scripture and the premise of expository preaching is that God has spoken. Our task is to communicate what he has committed to Scripture.”⁴ If the preacher questions whether God has spoken through Scripture, then he proclaims his message with doubt and uncertainty, leaving the question of authority to be answered by the listening community.

God speaks through his Word. Scripture bears witness that it is the written Word of God. In the Old Testament, phrases such as, “The Lord said,” “The Lord spoke,” and “The word of the Lord came” appear nearly four thousand times.⁵ Throughout the Old Testament, when the prophets spoke, it was acknowledged as God speaking. Those who spoke for God did not speak words that aligned with their life experiences; they spoke the Word given to them by God. Accordingly, the authority of Scripture is nothing less than the authority of God.

³Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), s.v. “Bible, Authority of the.”

⁴Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 25.

⁵R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 41.

Scripture shows the practical application of the authoritative nature of the Word of God. Paul writes to Timothy that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Paul reassures Timothy that the Word, which he is to proclaim, has come directly from God. Grudem states that in Paul’s use of the phrase, “‘breathed out,’ this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture.”⁶ According to Grudem, this verse states in a concise form what many Old Testament passages declare, namely, that Scripture is God’s Word in written form.⁷ They are the very words of God that have come to man through God’s divine act of inspiration. In these words, God has spoken, and these words are sufficient for correction, rebuke, and instruction.

Not only does God speak through his Word, but Jesus Christ, the Son, testifies to the authority of God’s Word. Jesus demonstrates the authority of Scripture by relying upon it when dealing with uncertainties and problems in his life. As Jesus teaches a new ethic to his disciples, he clarifies his position on Scripture: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law of the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, nor a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt 5:17-18). Jesus indicates that the Old Testament remains an authoritative divine testimony, which finds much of its fulfillment in his ministry. When tempted by Satan, Jesus relies on Scripture. He answers the taunts of Satan by replying, “It is written” (Matt 4). Later, when Satan tempts Jesus to avoid the cross through the rebuke of Peter, Jesus turns once again to Scripture, recalling that the

⁶Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 74.

⁷Ibid.

Son of man must suffer many things (Matt 16:21). Jesus also turns to the authority of Scripture when a rich, young ruler asks him how he could inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25-26). Jesus exercises, acknowledges, and submits to the authority of Scripture. When the Jews do not believe Jesus' message and criticize him for claiming to be God, he relies on the Scripture and points out that the Law supports his statement declaring that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:30-36). In doing this, Jesus declares that every word in Scripture is completely true and authoritative. Furthermore, Jesus' opponents do not criticize his view of Scripture here or anywhere else.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is, from a practical standpoint, the most important aspect of the trinitarian foundation for the authority of Scripture. Everything else is of no value or worth without the authority of the Holy Spirit.⁸ One can study theology and learn about God yet, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, one will possess only intellectual knowledge, not transforming knowledge. The Holy Spirit is the only one who illuminates the heart and mind of an individual and brings about real transformation.

The Holy Spirit does not illuminate Scripture in such a way as to conflict with the intended meaning of the author. Some in the history of the church have insisted that the biblical text cannot be properly understood unless one goes beyond the wording of the text and seeks the illumination of the Holy Spirit.⁹ They believed that one would miss the true meaning if he simply relied on the intended meaning of the author. Instead, they

⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1958), 62-94. Lloyd-Jones provides a thorough-going examination of the authority of the Holy Spirit as it pertains to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, the church, and in the life of the believer. He indicates in his writing that what one believes about Scripture and about the Lord himself can only become applicable when one submits to the authority and power of the Holy Spirit.

⁹Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Garque and William S. LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 189.

argued that one had to receive a special illumination from the Holy Spirit that provided a different meaning than the obvious one stated in the biblical text.¹⁰ This methodology was faulty in that it looked for a new and different illumination that was separate from the illumination of the biblical writers.

Beyond illumination, Scripture testifies to the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the biblical writers: "For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21). Here, we see the role of the Holy Spirit working with human vessels to record the authoritative Word of God. For example, Origen argued that the interpreter of the biblical text will miss the meaning if he seeks merely to interpret the passage from the words the biblical writer used. Origen believed that since the biblical writer wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter must also glean a spiritual meaning received only from the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The problem with this approach to biblical interpretation is that it does not allow the actual words of the text to convey fully their meaning, despite being given under inspiration from the Holy Spirit.¹²

Calvin describes the inner working of the Holy Spirit as being essential in order for man to receive the Word:

For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed

¹⁰Ibid., 189–90.

¹¹Origen, *De Principiis IV*, 7, cited by Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," 189-90.

¹²Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," 190.

what had been divinely commanded.¹³

The Holy Spirit, therefore, is necessary in order to convince the heart and mind of man that the biblical text is fully authoritative. The Spirit is the inner witness of the authenticity and authority of the biblical text. Fuller agrees with Calvin's emphasis on the importance of the inner working of the Holy Spirit, contending that the primary object of the Holy Spirit's action is the mind of the one reading the biblical text.¹⁴ Although Fuller believes the Spirit's illumination is not needed to attain a cognitive understanding of the biblical text, the Spirit's illumination is necessary to subdue one's pride and lead one to embrace the truths of God's Word.¹⁵ He believes strongly that illumination is related to the reception of truth. According to Fuller, the Spirit gives a person a love for God's Word so that its truth is applied to his life.¹⁶

While one can correctly interpret the biblical text and gain a cognitive understanding of the Scriptures, one cannot experience a transformation of behavior and embrace its biblical truths, outside of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The human mind is impaired by sin, but the mind can still reason, which enables it to use the necessary skills to interpret Scripture. However, the Holy Spirit is the primary means by

¹³John Calvin, *Institute of Christian Religion* 1.7.4, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1960), 1: 4.

¹⁴Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," 191

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁶Others share Fuller's view. Some of those who also embrace this view include William Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 289; Roy B. Zuck, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April-June 1984), 123-23; see also *idem*, *Teaching with Spiritual Power* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1993). Zuck believes that the Spirit's illumination helps believers understand the implications and values of the truth of God's Word and embrace its application to their lives.

which a believer is enabled to grasp biblical truth.¹⁷ The Spirit accomplishes this task by working in the mind of the reader, enabling him to grasp the truth of Scripture.

Understanding Authority

The issue of biblical authority is at the heart of the problem of much of the preaching among the revisionist leaders within the emerging church. In an attempt to recreate a biblical message that is more palatable to postmoderns, many revisionists have removed authority from the biblical text, and placed it in the realms of tradition, culture, and life experience. While one may consider this displacement of authority a valiant effort to connect with the culture, the danger inherent in such a displacement is alarming.

Revisionists' Understanding

The revisionist leaders' understanding of authority reveals a conformity to the culture in which they are seeking to minister. Born from a spirit of protest against the traditional evangelical church, the revisionists' view questions the sole authority of Scripture. They believe authority is centered in experience and relationships, not in institutions or static entities. In fact, many of their protests against the traditional evangelical church are protests against propositional statements of doctrine, deductive preaching, and a perceived notion of power exerted over the people.¹⁸ One of the reasons for their questioning of authority is their desire to accommodate the postmodern culture.

¹⁷*The Works of John Owens*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 4:124, 133.

¹⁸These protests are mentioned earlier in chapter three. For more information on the various individuals who emerged from traditional evangelical churches in protest of the perceived modernist tendencies, see Michael Yaconelli, *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); see also D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 26-28.

Postmodernism sees authority as a tool used by those in power to oppress the marginalized and promote their own personal agendas. The revisionists seek to escape traditional Christianity because they see it as claiming ultimate authority in people's lives. Revisionists believe that truth is found ultimately in community. So, they seek to develop communities of faith that embrace the search for truth in community, tradition, and Scripture.

A closer look at revisionists within the emerging church reveals some skeptical approaches to the understanding of authority of the Bible. One of the emerging church's respected theologians, Walter Brueggemann, demonstrates this fact when he argues that one's attempts at understanding the meaning of Scripture are greatly hindered because the words of God in the biblical text are refracted through the various authors whose words were impacted by their circumstances and experiences.¹⁹ For Brueggemann, the Scriptures may not be exactly what God said since they have been filtered and changed according to the perspective and agendas of the writers. Such a view casts doubt on the authority of Scripture by removing it from the mouth of God and refracting it through the lives and circumstances of the authors. Even though God revealed His Word to them, Brueggemann contends that one has no degree of certainty that what these authors penned was equally authoritative. He believes that the interpreter must come to the biblical text with a degree of suspicious scrutiny because its authority is in question.²⁰

Several revisionist leaders embrace an approach to biblical authority that is similar to Brueggemann's. They agree that the issue of biblical authority is not as certain

¹⁹Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection," *Christian Century* January 2000, 15.

²⁰Ibid.

as many traditional evangelicals have argued. Rather than allowing the biblical text to serve as the sole authority, these revisionists contend that one must rely on the life experiences of the communities of faith and one's various viewpoints to determine what governs one's decisions.²¹ For him, and many revisionists within the emerging church, interpretation of the Scriptures does not consist of a reiteration of the biblical text, but a new movement in a fresh, unuttered fashion.²² While it is true that the interpretation of Scripture must be more than a mere reiteration of the biblical text, too often the new movements that break out in a fresh, unuttered fashion distort the truth of the text and do not resemble the intended meaning of the author.

Bell follows some of Brueggemann's approaches to Scripture. They both focus on themes of the criticism of established structures and energizing people with hope.²³ Bell mentions in his writings that the Christian community must continually redefine their faith and view the Bible more as a human work than a work of God. Moreover, Bell clearly denies the sole authority of Scripture. He explains,

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that "Scripture alone" is our guide. It sounds nice,

²¹Brueggemann's notion of approaching Scripture with suspicious scrutiny is followed by several revisionist leaders, including Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 147-48; idem, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 66-76; idem, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming The Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 67-97; see also Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 41-69; see also Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free for All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 164-69.

²²Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority," 15.

²³Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). In this book, Bell uses Brueggemann's generative idea of prophetic imagination when he sees the return of Egypt or the rise of Egypt in each of us. The similarities between Bell and Brueggemann are more apparent in Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978). Brueggemann states that he pits the free, creative worldview of the prophetic against the royal consciousness of numb consumerism leading us to a current application that stands in the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition (46). Bell presents the same picture of the Old Testament being a message of deliverance from bondage for Israel, only to find themselves the new oppressors in his work.

but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God's Word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.²⁴

Bell's statements are troubling for a number of reasons. First, he states that the Bible was acknowledged as our sole authority during the Reformation. However, belief in the authority of Scripture predates the Reformation. This belief was expressed by both Jesus (Matt 4:4; 7:12; 15:3; Luke 24:44) and Peter (2 Pet 3:15-16). Another difficulty that arises from Bell's approach to Scripture is his contention that the church gave the Bible to man by voting to determine what would be deemed as Scripture. Bell is stating that the determining factor in compiling the Canon was the vote of the church. The truth is that these books that comprise the Canon were already in use by the church and were recognized as Scripture by both Paul and Peter in the New Testament. Furthermore, the Old Testament Canon was recognized as Scripture as early as the first century by Jewish historian, Josephus, long before the canonization of Scripture was completed.²⁵

Beckwith notes that it is likely all the books of the Canon were accepted as Scripture from an early period in some parts of the church, since it is doubtful that these documents rose from obscurity to canonization at the end of the fourth century.²⁶

One final and distressing problem with Bell's approach is his contention that the Bible is not a sufficient authority for our lives. Here, Bell leaves the door open to the

²⁴Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 67-68.

²⁵R. T. Beckwith, "The Canon of Scripture," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, and others (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 29-31.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

traditions, popular ideas, cultural norms, and life experiences of men as partnering authorities.

McLaren also embraces the scrutiny of the biblical text argued by Brueggemann. McLaren denies that doctrines supported by Scripture can be held with any degree of certainty. In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he downplays any benefit in having right beliefs while extolling the rewards of one's journey in the search of truth. McLaren writes,

The achievement of “right thinking” therefore recedes, happily, farther beyond our grasp the more we pursue it. As it eludes us, we are strangely rewarded: we feel gratitude and love, humility and wonder, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming. We shout hallelujah, and we weep tears of joy. So we pursue it all the more until the end when we find it has been pursuing us and we are caught up into the Pursuer we have so long pursued.²⁷

McLaren argues that most conservative Christians see Scripture as a constitution, governing every aspect of our lives. He believes this is an errant view that promotes proof-texting and bolsters the authority of the traditional evangelical church and enslaves those in their faith communities.²⁸ McLaren, instead, opts for a view of Scripture that sees the biblical text as a library of culture and community. This biblical library is a carefully selected group of documents compiled by people who long to understand and belong to the community of people who seek after the God of Abraham.²⁹ Thus, in McLaren's view, the compilation of the canon is reduced to decisions made by men rather than a divine fiat.

McLaren embraces the idea that Scripture is a library of culture because of his

²⁷McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 336.

²⁸McLaren, *A New Christianity*, 80.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

aversion to the neat, orderly, consistent, propositional truths acknowledged in the traditional evangelical approach. He celebrates the fact that his approach sees tension and debate within the text. For McLaren, the messiness of the text is a clear picture of cultural influence.³⁰ His approach sees the text as an ongoing conversation with and about God that is characterized by arguments and invites the opinions and beliefs of others.³¹ The danger of this approach is demonstrated most clearly in McLaren's statements contrasting the Bible as constitution (traditional evangelical approach) and the Bible as library (his approach):

Does the Bible alone provide enough clarity to resolve all questions as a good constitution should? No. We have no reason to believe it was ever meant to do that, as much as we've tried to force it to do so. From all sides it becomes clear that the Bible, if it is truly inspired by God, wasn't meant to end conversation and give the final word on controversies. If this were its purpose, it has failed miserably. (This fact must be faced). But if, instead, it was inspired and intended to stimulate conversation, to keep people thinking and talking and arguing and seeking, across continents and centuries, it has succeeded and is succeeding in a truly remarkable way.³²

According to McLaren, the Bible was never intended to clarify issues of life. Instead, the Bible was given to us by God to promote conversation, spur arguments, and keep people talking about the biblical texts. While McLaren is correct in assessing that his methodology does spur conversations and arguments, he is misguided in his belief that the Bible was never intended to provide the final word. On the contrary, the Bible claims to be fully sufficient in dealing with the issue of life. Paul states, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Here Paul clearly articulates that the Scriptures are fully sufficient to rebuke

³⁰Ibid., 81-82.

³¹Ibid., 83-84.

³²Ibid., 92.

and correct behavior, and to train in righteousness.

McLaren reduces biblical doctrines to opinions and thus denies both the clarity of Scripture and the sole authority of Scripture. In his view, diverse viewpoints and interpretations are welcomed and acknowledged. This approach to Scripture eliminates the authority of any one viewpoint. Thus, for the revisionists within the emerging church, God's voice is no longer clear. Scripture is a cacophony of voices clamoring to echo their unique presentation of authority.

Grenz and Franke, provide a nuanced view of authority that is compatible with that of Bell and McLaren. Grenz and Franke reject the idea of building a theology on a foundationalist view, in which basic, presupposed beliefs form its foundation. They reject the correspondence theory of truth, instead, they believe that one should think in terms of webs of belief which cohere internally with shared beliefs.³³ Grenz believes that we cannot simply equate the revelation of God with the Bible. He outlines a three-fold connection of revelation with the Bible. First, the Bible is revelation in a "derivative" sense. Second, the Bible is "functional" revelation. Third, the Bible is "mediate" revelation in that it mediates to us the proper understanding of God's essence.³⁴ Thus, for Grenz, the Bible is derivatively, functionally, and mediately revelation, but not ontologically revelation.

Since, according to Grenz, Scripture does not contain sufficient authority to govern one's life, he develops a model with three sources of authority: Scripture, the

³³Stanley J. Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 38-39.

³⁴Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 516-17.

theological heritage of the church, and culture.³⁵ He contends that when one engages in the interpretation of Scripture he must look simultaneously to the biblical text, theological heritage, and the present-day cultural context. While Grenz does state that one must start with the biblical text, he is also very clear that one cannot stop there. All three sources of authority must be considered.³⁶ Therefore, the Word of God is filtered through the grid of the church's theological heritage and the ideas and thoughts of today's culture. What remains becomes authoritative. While Grenz states that he believes the Bible is the final authority and uses it to govern all the other sources of authority, some of the revisionists view the community as the final authority.³⁷

Evangelical Understanding

Luther encapsulates the importance of the concept of biblical authority for evangelicals in his bold proclamation at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. While under intense pressure to recant his beliefs concerning justification by faith and other embraced truths of the Bible, Luther responded to Meister Eck as follows:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordship desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.³⁸

³⁵Ibid., 21.

³⁶Ibid., 23. This approach is followed to different degrees by revisionist preachers Doug Pagitt and Tim Conder. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 195; idem., *Church Re-imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 159-68; Conder and Rhodes, *Free for All*, 231-47.

³⁷Various revisionists who argue that there are times that the community's beliefs and interests hold more authority than the Scripture. See Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, 159-68; Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 194-95; and Conder and Rhodes, *Free for All*, 231-47.

³⁸Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Press, 1955), 144.

Luther, like many evangelicals since, refused to acknowledge tradition or the church as a higher authority than the Word of God. The present battle over the issue of authority is waged precisely in this arena. Many outside of traditional circles would contend that Scripture is not sufficient on its own so they give one's life experiences and the belief of the listening community a position of greater authority than Scripture. Luther, however, laid the benchmark for the evangelical view of the authority of Scripture when he boldly refused to allow the authority of popes or councils to supercede the authority of Scripture.

Traditional evangelicals believe in the sole authority of Scripture because Scripture is God-breathed and because God is the ultimate authority. Mayhue asserts that God's authority is obvious and without question when one considers three facts: "First, God created the heavens and the earth and that which is therein (Genesis 1-2). Second, God owns the earth, all that it contains, those who dwell in it (Ps 24:1). Third, in the end God consummates it all in that He declared, 'Behold, I am making all things new' (Rev 21:5)."³⁹

The traditional evangelical understanding of authority rests on grounds established in Scripture. Frame acknowledges that biblical authority is grounded in the presupposition of the truth of Scripture when he asserts, "There is no higher authority, no greater ground of certainty The truth of Scripture is a presupposition for God's people."⁴⁰ The authority and truthfulness of God's Word is not determined by man's reasoning or experiences but deductively from the very testimony of Scripture. God's Word is authoritative because God has spoken it and because he is Sovereign over all

³⁹Richard Mayhue, "The Authority of Scripture," *The Masters Seminary Journal* 15, no.2 (Fall 2004): 229.

⁴⁰John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 127.

creation and reigns over all things.

A second grounding of one's understanding of the authority of Scripture in the testimony of the biblical text finds further support in the writing of Carl F. H. Henry.

Henry establishes the argument for biblical authority from the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. He explains,

God is the source of Holy Scripture; Christ is the central message; and the Holy Spirit, who inspired it and illumines its message to the reader, bears witness by this inscripturated Word to the Word enfleshed, crucified, risen, and returning.⁴¹

Here, Henry illustrates the roles of the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates. The fact that the biblical text finds its origin in divine inspiration attests to the fact that the authority of Scripture is directly derived from the authority of God.

People within all realms of evangelicalism attest to biblical authority, but their meanings of this concept differ greatly. The Westminster Confession of Faith expresses the doctrine of biblical authority as follows:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions, which are ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.⁴²

This confession affirms the belief that Scripture has absolute authority in matters of faith and practice. This confession makes clear that while traditions are helpful, they are only

⁴¹Carl F. H. Henry, *The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible*, in vol. 1 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 25.

⁴²*Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, Section VI, reprint ed. (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 22-23.

binding when they conform to Scripture. The traditions of the church are not intended to exercise authority over Scripture but rather to reveal how the church through the ages has sought to interpret the Scriptures. One also must understand that while culture changes rapidly at times, one cannot simply repaint the Christian faith to merge with society's beliefs in order to be relevant. Grenz is correct in stating that we must be aware of our cultural settings when we interpret the Scripture, but the revisionists' practice of reading the Bible through the grid of society is not what Grenz had in mind, nor is it the helpful in proclaiming the biblical truths.

Conclusion

In biblical preaching, where one locates authority is as significant as one's understanding of truth. Once one calls into question the authority of Scripture, one is left without a clear word from God. The postmodern culture, with their rejection of absolute truth and denial of authority, makes it difficult to proclaim the biblical truth of the gospel. However, one cannot reach a troubled and confused culture by offering them a message that is every bit as confusing as their own. One does not attempt to reach an uncertain world by proclaiming an uncertain truth. Yet, when the revisionist leaders strip the Bible of its authority and place that authority in the traditions of the church and in the experiences of the community, they are offering a message that is not only fluid, but one that is as uncertain as the culture in which they are ministering.

The Bible makes it evident that it is the absolute authority for faith and practice. Past confessions of the church acknowledge the authority of Scripture and complement this truth made evident in God's Word. Therefore, the correct approach for Christians to take is to study carefully the confessions of the church, take careful note of

the traditions of the church, be aware of the beliefs of the community and their life experiences, and then carefully examine them with the Word of God. Scripture must be the grid through which one views the world.

The authority of Scripture is evidenced by the God who speaks, the Son who saves, and the Spirit who illuminates. The Word is authoritative because God spoke the Word to man. Scripture is not man's opinions or thoughts; it is God's spoken Word to man. In addition, Scripture points to Jesus Christ, the Son who himself recognized the authority of God's Word and lived his life in subjection to the authority of Scripture. Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit who impressed upon man what they were to write. The Holy Spirit is the one who brought the Word of God to man. Presently, he illuminates the truth of Scripture bringing conviction, understanding, and power to live according to these truths.

The preacher of God's Word must have a firm grasp on the issue of biblical authority. If one adopts the revisionist understanding of Scripture as one authority among many one has greatly hindered his congregants from hearing the clear voice of God. God has spoken clearly, boldly, and without reserve in his Word. The preacher is called upon to do nothing less than speak that which God has already spoken. This cannot be done without full confidence in the authority of Scripture. More than ever before, the world needs to hear clearly the voice of God. For that sound to be heard clearly and powerfully, one must acknowledge the absolute authority of Scripture.

CHAPTER 6

PREACHING IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

Revisionists within the emerging church adapt their methods as well as their message to reach today's postmoderns. Since people have varying interests and are prone to learn in different ways, the revisionists use different approaches to connect with them. In their desire to connect with postmoderns revisionists such as Rob Bell believe there is a constant need for reinterpretation of the biblical text.¹ This desire for a constant reinterpretation of the biblical text influences the revisionists' hermeneutical approach which directly influences their preaching.²

This chapter seeks to present the various revisionist approaches to preaching,

¹Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 10-14.

²Some of the hermeneutical methods employed by the revisionists include the hermeneutical circle, reader-response criticism, and community hermeneutic. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 106-07. In the Hermeneutical Circle the interpreter is not simply a detached observer of the text, but one who actually participates in the text. This approach views the interpreter's presuppositions as fused together with the historical situation of the text such that interpretation becomes a dialogue exposing the text simultaneously to the interpreter's presuppositions and life experiences. See also, Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13. In the radical reader-response criticism there is no attempt to guard against subjectivity on the part of the reader; instead, subjectivity is welcomed. Fish contends that the text has no meaning, but is the consequence of the reading community's interpretive activities. One sees this approach used in the preaching methodology of Doug Pagitt in which the community becomes co-creators of meaning in his progressive dialogue. See also Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free for All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 54-62). The community hermeneutic demands the presence of faithful community to interpret and embody the text. In doing this, they not only make the Bible a living word through their community activities, but they also shape how the Bible is read. According to Conder, the truth of Scripture can only be found in divergent understanding of the biblical text born out in communities. He believes that one needs many voices in the process of interpretation because only a collective people can make up a tradition.

analyze sermons from four prominent revisionist preachers, and demonstrate how the preaching of the revisionists consistently displaces authority and denies truth. The result of this analysis will reveal that revisionist preaching is deficient in its attempt to present the truth of the gospel.

The Revisionists' Approach To Preaching

While the contention of this dissertation is that expository preaching fulfills the function of rightly dividing the Word, the revisionists employ a number of preaching methodologies. Each of these revisionists primarily focuses on the listeners and their life experiences rather than beginning with the biblical text and shaping their lives through its principles.

The Inductive Method

One preaching method made popular by Fred Craddock is inductive preaching. This method seeks to involve listeners in the preaching moment. Craddock explains inductive preaching in this manner: "The inductive method of preaching is founded on a central conviction that the hearers should be permitted to take the same inductive trip that brought the preacher to the pulpit and be granted the freedom to arrive at its own conclusions."³ While this definition might sound appealing in that it allows the hearers to go along for the journey of interpretation, it becomes problematic when it states that the preacher allows the listener to arrive at his own conclusions.

One of the dangers in this inductive method of preaching is that the hearer may or may not finish the story correctly. This method works fine if one holds that the biblical

³Fred Craddock, "The Inductive Method in Preaching," in *A New Hearing: Living Options in a Homiletical Method*, ed. Richard Eslinger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 115.

text has no intended meaning but, if one embraces the traditional view that the intended meaning in the text, it is flawed. When the listener is allowed to discover his or her own ending to the story, the conclusions could be contradictory to the intended meaning of the biblical text.

The inductive method is marked by attention to concrete experiences.⁴ This methodology does not start with the biblical text and apply it to the listeners like expository preaching does. The inductive method focuses on the life experiences of the listeners as foundational to the sermon and combines these with the biblical text to develop the sermon. Thus, the preacher starts with the experiences of the listeners and then moves to the biblical text after having assessed the listeners' life experiences.⁵ This methodology encourages the listeners to find themselves in the biblical story.

The Abductive Method of Preaching

Another method of preaching that has enjoyed some popularity among revisionists is abductive preaching. Leonard Sweet, who collaborated with Brian McLaren in writing *A is for Abduction*, describes the abductive method as one that “seizes people by the imagination and transports them from their current world into another world, where they can gain a new perspective.”⁶ The force of the abductive method is seen clearly in the definition of the word “abduct,” “to carry off by force.”⁷ As

⁴Ibid., 116.

⁵Ibid., 123.

⁶Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 31.

⁷*The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), s.v. “abduct.”

Sweet maintains, the intent of the abductive method is to force the reader to go somewhere they had not intended on going. This methodology is anchored in the elements of surprise and unpredictability, accosting the listeners with an unexpected situation and then taking them to a place they never imagined. Unlike the expository method, which begins with the biblical text and seeks to expose and clearly articulate meaning, this approach begins with an experience and seeks to surprise, astonish, and confuse the listener. Instead of looking for the big idea within the biblical text, abductive preaching searches for an experience to create. The message unfolds much like a conversation, full of twists.⁸

Proponents of this preaching methodology argue that preaching that seeks to analyze the biblical text and then apply it to life is too predictable and ultimately ineffective in the emerging culture. McLaren notes his affection for this methodology in his critique of Lynn Anderson's sermon, "Basket of Memories." McLaren praises Anderson's striking use of abduction by taking the listeners on a journey to the past and then bringing them back in a way that changes them forever.⁹ McLaren's own preaching style shows some elements of abduction. He often calls upon his hearers to view the biblical text in a way that leads to more creative interpretations and new meaning.¹⁰

Another example of abductive preaching is McLaren's sermon on Hosea in

⁸Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 32-33.

⁹Brian D. McLaren, "Response to Anderson's Sermon," in *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative of Preaching* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2009), 177.

¹⁰Brian D. McLaren, "Exodus and Today's Word," in *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative of Preaching*, ed. David Fleer and David Bland (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2009), 151-63. In this sermon, McLaren challenges the reader to approach the biblical text in a new and fresh way seeing it as a community library instead of a constitution. He challenges many of the conventional ways of looking at the Bible.

which he likens the biblical story depicted there with his theory of atonement. God is the victim who identifies with all those who have been oppressed and marginalized. He begins with a person's marginalized situation, reads this into the biblical text, and then reinterprets the message of Hosea.¹¹ Instead of the story of Hosea being about the redemptive love of God for his people, it becomes a story of how God, as a victim, identifies with the victims of society.

The problem with the abductive method of preaching is that it focuses more on shocking listeners out of their complacency, astonishing them, and helping them discover new meaning than it does on communicating the words God has spoken. Some may find this type of preaching entertaining and the journey enjoyable, but, in the process, the message that is received may not contain the intended meaning of the biblical author.

In what follows, I present an analysis of the sermons of four revisionist preachers, Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt, and Tim Conder demonstrating the manner in which these sermons redefine the truth and displace the authority of Scripture.

Analysis of Revisionist Sermons

Rob Bell

One of the leading revisionists within the emerging church is Rob Bell. His preaching style mixes narrative theology with stand-up comedy. Although Bell keeps the service simple at Mars Hill when he goes on tour, he uses high-energy music and sophisticated audiovisuals. These tours often resemble Broadway productions more than sermons.

¹¹Brian D. McLaren, "The Cross As Prophetic Action," in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, ed. Mark Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 110-21.

Bell's allegiance to narrative theology guides his hermeneutic.¹² Most of his sermons do not rely on a specific biblical text but follow a theme in Scripture. While engaging and informative, Bell's approach continually recreates the meaning of the text. Bell bases his narrative theology on the Five Act Hermeneutic of N. T. Wright. In Wright's heremeneutic there are five acts: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, and the church. In the fifth act, the church is called to live out the gospel in imaginative, creative, and improvisational ways. Wright likens his hermeneutic to a play in which the actors write the last act.¹³ This hermeneutic leads Bell to analyze the disposition of his community and then rewrite the meaning of the biblical text so that it accommodates their circumstances.

Bell's sermons analyzed in this study are chosen because they represent a broad spectrum of his preaching. In these sermons, one is exposed to Bell's narrative theology, which demonstrates his penchant for storytelling to redefine the truth. Two of the sermons were chosen because their texts provide ample opportunity to present the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that this implies. These sermons demonstrate a consistent pattern of neglecting the gospel. I also selected three sermons from Bell's series, "Jesus Wants To Save Christians," because this series formed the foundation for his book of the same title. This sermon series addresses many of the

¹²Rob Bell's narrative theology follows the story-line of the Old Testament although he believes that the beginning point is in Exodus. According to Bell, God redeemed Israel from Egypt and blessed them only to see them become the oppressors themselves. He sees God's unfolding story as one in which all the oppressed are set at liberty and man lives in harmony with God, with one another, and with creations. According to Bell's theology, all will flourish with God in the end, just as God intended. See Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Christian Manifesto for a Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); see also the Mars Hill Bible Church website at www.marshill.org/believe.html; Internet.

¹³N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), xi.

things that Bell believes are wrong with traditional evangelical Christianity.

In the three sermons from the series, “Jesus Wants To Save Christians,” I look at Bell’s narrative approach and demonstrate how he utilizes stories to redefine the truth of the biblical text. Next, I examine two of Bell’s sermons dealing with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “It Stops Here” and “Resurrection.” In this analysis, I look at the way that Bell deals with the biblical text and contend that the message he delivers is not the meaning intended by the biblical author. I also argue that Bell presents a faulty understanding of the atonement that redefines the truth of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection.

“Jesus Wants to Save Christians.” “ In his sermon, “Jesus Wants To Save Christians”¹⁴ Bell presents his narrative theology as the “real” big picture. He starts with the call of Moses in Exodus 3. According to Bell, the real story begins with Israel’s suffering in Egypt. The term “Egypt,” according to Bell, is a metaphor of bondage, sin, and systemic oppression. God enters the story to bring people out of this system of evil. Once God delivers them from this oppressive system, Bell maintains that God invites them to be his treasured people who live out his message of deliverance from oppression and injustice. Bell continues his narrative by relaying how Israel did not live out this message but instead became oppressors themselves, which led to their eventual exile. Bell argues that God punishes them as a result of their oppression of other nations. According to Bell, Israel was supposed to use the blessing they received from God to bless other nations. God’s anger, in Bell’s view, was primarily due to the injustice and

¹⁴Rob Bell, “Jesus Wants to Save Christians,” Mars Hill Bible Church, 10 September 2006 [on-line]; accessed 14 March 2007; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings>; Internet.

oppression they showed to other nations.

Bell culminates his story by saying that Jesus came announcing liberation as the new Moses. He sees Jesus' role not as one who comes seeking to save those who are lost, but as one who comes to set free all those who are oppressed. For Bell, Jesus' message is delivered with a backdrop of exile. Since the Jews were under Roman oppression, their situation is similar to that of Egypt. Jesus' message is that after exile they will be a light to the nations. In Bell's opinion, the purpose of Jesus' coming is to restore man to the way he really is so that he can bless others.

In his sermon, Bell argues that Jesus' message is to confront people with their God-given destiny. He believes that Jesus' message was aimed solely at the religious people. Bell states that, "Jesus does not go to the lost."¹⁵ Bell completely ignores the numerous accounts of Jesus' going directly to those who are lost, not to mention Jesus' own statement that his purpose in coming was that he might seek and save those who are lost (Luke 19:10). Bell's blatant avoidance of Jesus' message to the lost is consistent with his *Nooma* video series where he presents the purpose of Jesus' coming to be one of restoring creation and liberating the oppressed.¹⁶

¹⁵Bell, "Jesus Wants to Save Christians."

¹⁶For examples of Bell's avoidance of the need for mankind to repent and be redeemed see his twenty-two *Nooma* Videos, which he asserts are teaching tools. Bell does not address the need for man's repentance or redemption in any of these videos. Instead, he focuses on living a good life, treating one another with love and respect, and respecting creation. See Rob Bell, *Rain* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Flame* [DVD] (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Trees* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Sunday* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: 2005); *Noise* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Kickball* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Luggage* [DVD-ROM] [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005]; idem, *Dust* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Bullhorn* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Lump* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Rhythm* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); idem, *Matthew* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); idem, *Rich* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); idem, *Breathe* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); idem, *You* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); and idem, *Store* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

Bell's lack of emphasis on making the lost aware of their need for Christ may come from his belief that traditional evangelical churches focus too heavily on getting into heaven after one dies, rather than on living in the way of Jesus now. Bell argues that the traditional evangelical church puts so much emphasis on sins and forgiveness that they completely ignore walking in the way of Jesus. While one cannot argue that many professing Christians do not walk in the way of Jesus, this is not a problem that is limited to traditional evangelical churches, nor does it justify ignoring the redemptive message of the gospel.

One might argue that Bell's problem is simply that he has a defective narrative theology and is not necessarily seeking to redefine truth and displace authority. However, when Bell uses his narrative theology to rewrite the biblical story in a way that better coincides with his preferences he redefines the truth of the biblical text. The truth of the gospel is that man is sinful, and in need of salvation through Christ. The message that Bell offers in his sermon is quite different. His is a message that seeks to redeem world systems and liberate the oppressed without a clear call for repentance or the offer of salvation. Consistent with his desire to repaint the Christian faith, Bell redefines the truth of the gospel in this sermon. Further, when Bell contends that Jesus' message was only to the religious of his day, he undermines the authority of Scripture, which plainly declares that Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost. Furthermore, Scripture is clear that his name was called Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). Thus, Jesus came offering redemption, not merely deliverance or restoration of the created order. Bell reinterprets the truth of God's Word, especially displacing Scripture's authority with that of the reader.

“Jesus Came to Save Christians, Part Two.” Bell continued his series with a sermon on 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.¹⁷ In this sermon, Bell focuses on verses 4 and 5, emphasizing that Paul did not preach with wisdom or persuasion but rather with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power. From this emphasis, Bell argues that Paul did not go to Corinth preaching the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ for this would be of no effect. Bell attempts to prove his case by providing a litany of pagan deities who were believed to be born of a virgin, crucified, and resurrected. Some of these pagan deities were Mithra, a virgin born around 600 B.C.; Atti, a virgin born around 200 B.C., hung on a cross, and later arose from the dead; Adonis a virgin born around 200 B.C., and known as the son of god; and Horus, a god who was brought gifts by foreign leaders as a child and later crucified. He argues that if one were to say, “My God was born of a virgin, crucified, and rose from the dead, he might get a response like, that is cool, mine too.”¹⁸ According to Bell, for one to say that Jesus was virgin born, crucified, and resurrected would not be that impressive.

Bell further argued that Paul let the power of God stand behind his message and did not argue using propositional truths. He believes that Paul did not point to the cross because other deities had supposedly died on a cross. Bell believes that Paul did not come into town persuading people to his way of thinking because Paul states that his preaching was not with wise and persuasive words. Instead, Bell maintains that Paul simply declares the power of God evident in the changed lives of the people as a witness of the resurrection.

¹⁷Rob Bell, “Jesus Wants to Save Christians, Part Two,” Mars Hill Bible Church, September 17, 2006 [on-line]; accessed 14 March 2007; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings>; Internet.

¹⁸Ibid.

As an example of Paul not using propositional truths, Bell tells the story of the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19. Bell points out that the people were ready to kill Paul when the city clerk stood up and quieted them by telling them that Paul had not broken any law nor had he blasphemed their goddess. Bell takes the clerk's statement and concludes that while Paul was in Ephesus, he never spoke one word against the false religion that was present there. Bell concludes this thought by saying that God did not call him to prove to others they were wrong but rather to demonstrate and announce the kingdom of God. For Bell, one's Christian faith is demonstrated by living like Jesus. If anyone asks you about your faith one should tell how Jesus is reconciling all of creation to himself.

The problem with Bell's interpretation of this biblical text is that he omits Paul's statement: "I propose to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). While Paul does not use human wisdom or persuasive speech, he does speak with spiritual wisdom, boldly presenting the gospel. Bell is on shaky theological ground when he argues that Paul would not have talked about the basic truths of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to the missionary journeys presented in Acts, Paul always centered his message on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Not only does Bell fail to acknowledge Paul's statement that he knows nothing but Christ and him crucified, but his argument that people would not be convinced by the proclamation of the cross of Christ is ineffective. As reported in Acts 19, Paul argues persuasively for three months concerning the kingdom of God and then continues doing so for three years. As a result of Paul's persuasive testimony and the powerful works of the Holy Spirit, the people of Ephesus, who had once practiced sorcery, burned their scrolls. In fact, it was Paul's persuasive testimony of the resurrected Christ that so compelled the crowds to give up their former pagan beliefs.

In this sermon Bell draws from a number of biblical texts to solidify his point. However, instead of making his point stronger, his constant jumping from text to text weakens his case. He misrepresents Paul and the early church by saying that they would not defend propositional truths and simply live the Christian life with power. Bell fails to consider that the reason there was of power behind their preaching was because they were proclaiming the truth as it was given to them. The early church continued to proclaim the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, contrary to Bell's contention, Paul did seek to persuade his listeners. Paul reasoned with Agrippa and almost persuaded him to believe (Acts 26:28). Peter and John did not hesitate to tell the religious leaders they were wrong when they stood before the high priest and the council: "[W]e must obey God rather than men. The God of our father raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:28-31). Peter did not rely merely on their changed lives. They made known the propositional truth of the gospel.

Bell's fluid concept of truth colors his interpretation. When he ignores the biblical context and omits important aspects of Old Testament history simply to color his presentation, he redefines the truth of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and makes them inconsequential. As mentioned before, Bell's avoids speaking of the atonement of Jesus Christ and the necessity of repentance. He focuses on the life one lives rather than on the crucified Christ.

“Jesus Wants to Save Christians, Part Three–Hell.” In this sermon,¹⁹ Bell

¹⁹Rob Bell, “Jesus Wants to Save Christians Part Three: Hell,” Mars Hill Bible Church, September 24, 2006 [on-line]; accessed 14 November 2008; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings>; Internet.

spends fifteen to twenty minutes parading through various terms and social customs to convince his hearers that the biblical concept of hell does not refer to a place of eternal torment, but rather a present reality. He argues that not every word translated “hell” in the Bible actually means a physical place of torment. In fact, he notes that Jesus never talked about one’s eternal destination when he talked about hell; rather, he talked about the present reality that people were experiencing. Bell states that Jesus used the term “gehenna” twelve times, referring to the town dump where children were sacrificed to Molech. Gehenna stood for everything that was evil and corrupt. Bell explains away Jesus’ language of eternal fire, torment, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth by explaining that these things were true of the town dump. He argues that fires were continually set there to get rid of the trash. He further notes that dogs would often wail and bite at each other in the quest for food, providing the vivid imagery of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Bell believes that hell is a place, an event, or a situation in which things are not as God desires them to be. According to Bell, hell is famine, oppression, debt, loneliness, despair, hatred, and captivity. He points out that when Jesus spoke of hell, he was always talking to religious people and confronting them with those things in their lives that made them hellish. Bell highlights various texts in Matthew in which Jesus addresses the issues of contempt (5:22), lust (5:29), people-pleasing (10: 28), and temptation (18:7-9). In each of these passages, Bell maintains that the people of God are not living like the people of God. Thus, Bell maintains that Jesus warned them to live their destiny because when they do not, they live like they belong in the town dump.

Bell’s thesis in this sermon is that Jesus wants to save Christians from seeing hell as a place for them, and see it instead as a reality for us now. Bell argues that when

Jesus speaks of hell as he does, he does so because the religious leaders are not living righteous lives. Bell believes that Jesus was telling the religious people of the day that their hellish lives were keeping them from being who God wanted them to be.

This sermon is problematic in a number of ways. Bell is determined to make hell a present reality rather than an eternal destination. Since he believes that the teaching of Scripture is that God wants to eliminate injustice, oppression, violence, and captivity, Bell sees the existence of these systemic problems as hell. Bell believes the problem with mankind is their “anti-kingdom approach,” which incorporates the systemic evils above.²⁰ Bell overlooks man’s ultimate problem, sin.

The difficulties evident in this sermon become more apparent when one considers Bell’s other writings on the subject of hell. Bell cannot reconcile the reality of hell reserved for those who reject God with his view of a benevolent God who has already accepted everyone. In his book, *Velvet Elvis* Bell writes, “Heaven is full of forgiven people. Hell is full of forgiven people. Hell and Heaven are full of people God loves, whom Jesus died for. The difference is how we choose to live, whose story we choose to live in.”²¹ Since hell, for Bell, is a present reality, many forgiven people live in hell.

Bell’s hermeneutic here is also problematic. His hermeneutic approach is precisely the reason his sermon redefines truth and displaces authority. Bell sees the biblical text as a human effort that is in constant need of revision. In light of this presupposition, Bell has no qualms with redefining the traditional view of hell. Bell’s narrative theology sees liberation from oppression and reconciliation of all things to God

²⁰Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Christian Manifesto for a Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 26. This book is the compilation of much of Bell’s sermon series and works from the premise that much of Christianity needs to be rescued.

²¹Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 146.

as the central thrust of the Bible.²²

As a result of this mindset, Bell paints the doctrine of hell as a present reality that incorporates all those things from which God wants to free us. Since Bell believes that God does not need to be appeased that there is no need of sacrifice on our behalf, and that the message of Scripture is about alleviating oppression and injustice, hell, as most Christians understand it, simply does not make sense.²³ Thus, he redefines the truth of the doctrine of hell as clearly presented in the biblical text.

Bell's mishandling of the biblical text is seen in this sermon as he conveniently limits his references to hell to those that do not explicitly refer to the eternal state of hell. While he mentions all the warnings concerning hell, he fails to deal with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in which hell is described in detail and acknowledged as an eternal state. Bell also alludes only casually to the references to hell in Revelation. Here in this sermon, one sees Bell side-stepping the truth concerning hell as revealed in Scripture because it does not fit his theology.

“It Stops Here.” In another sermon, Bell approaches the issue of forgiving by looking to the Christ event. In his sermon, “It Stops Here,”²⁴ Bell addresses the need to end the vicious cycle of anger and revenge. His biblical text is Luke 23:34: “And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He makes no effort to

²²Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 21-50.

²³Bell maintains that God does not need to be appeased for our sin. He rejects the idea that we have to do something to be reconciled to God. He further argues that God has already come to us and reconciled us through the cross and we simply need to live in light of it. For Bell, all humanity is at peace with God; it simply needs to experience it. See Rob Bell, *The Gods Aren't Angry* [DVD-ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

²⁴Rob Bell, “It Stops Here,” Mars Hill Bible Church, June 27, 2008 [on-line]; accessed 12 September 2008; available from <http://www.marshall.org/podcasts>; Internet.

exposit the biblical text. He simply states that at this critical point in Jesus' life he is thinking about forgiveness instead of revenge. The entire thrust of his message is how one deals with anger and the difficulty of forgiving. Bell pictures Christ on the cross with the natural reaction of revenge rearing its head, but Jesus chose forgiveness instead. According to Bell, Jesus provides us with the model for true forgiveness.

Bell does not address the fact that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of those who receive him as Savior. In fact, Bell does not even mention the issue of sin or the atonement for sin. He sees a Christ-pattern of forgiveness in Jesus' death and resurrection. Bell states that it is one thing to affirm what Jesus did on the cross, but it is another to enter into the Christ-pattern of death and rebirth. He argues that forgiveness is dying to pain and anger and rising to a new life of freedom. According to Bell, the meaning of Luke 23:34 is that through the cross the pain of unforgiveness, injustice, and anger are put to death. The cross, for Bell, is about Christ taking the cost of our forgiveness upon Himself, which leads to a resurrection without bitterness and cynicism. He sees the message of forgiveness as one that must be extended through the world. When one forgives, Bell maintains, he will experience the love of Christ and be recreated.

Bell's approach to this text has several flaws. First, he completely misses the point of Luke 23:34. He takes one verse out of the context of the passion of Christ and redefines the crucifixion of Christ so that it becomes a statement about forgiveness instead of atonement for sins. While it is true that Jesus provides a powerful illustration of forgiveness at the cross, that is not the message of the text. Second, throughout his message, Bell never points out why Jesus is being crucified. He talks about the injustice done to Jesus, the false charges, and the angry religious leaders, but he never acknowledges that Jesus was on that cross to pay the penalty for the sins of those who

believe in him. Third, Bell maintains that when one forgives, one experiences the love of Christ and is recreated. According to this statement, anyone who forgives another becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. This implies that people who are lost cannot forgive others or that a person experiences salvation simply on the basis of forgiving other people. The thrust of Bell's sermon indicates the latter. His whole message is that forgiveness changes the world and that Christians need to exercise this spirit of forgiveness.

When Bell interprets the meaning of the text in Luke 23, he denies the authority of Scripture and exerts his own authority upon the text. His aversion to penal substitutionary atonement is noted in his works, which explains his repainting of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Bell diminishes the demand that God places upon mankind by choosing not to address what the cross says about mankind's separation from God. According to Bell's writings and sermons, he embraces a theology that is inclusive and focused on social justice rather than the need to be made right with God.²⁶ His focus on social justice in this text is evident in this sermon in that he chooses to make it about Jesus being a marginalized, oppressed victim on the cross who shows us that the message of the crucifixion is that we must forgive one another. Since Bell believes that mankind is at peace with God and simply needs to live life in light of that reality, there is no need for a sacrifice for sins.

“The Resurrection.” A final example of Bell's sermons is his 2010 Easter

²⁵Bell's aversion to the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ is noted in several of his works. See *Velvet Elvis*, 145-47; idem, *The Gods Aren't Angry* [DVD-ROM]; and idem, *Everything Is Spiritual* [DVD-ROM].

²⁶For more on Bell's liberation theology and emphasis on a social gospel, see Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, 11-51.

Message entitled, “The Resurrection.”²⁷ In this message, Bell preaches on the empty tomb and focuses his message on God renewing the world. For Bell, the empty tomb changes how things work. He contends that the message of Easter is not about life after death or the possibility of going to heaven. Instead, the message of the empty tomb is about one’s life now.

Bell shares that when the women went to the tomb they were shocked that the tomb was empty. According to Bell, the resurrection speaks of the new creation and the affirmation of all creation. It proclaims God’s renewing of all things created. Bell believes that the empty tomb declares that this world matters. He argues that what you do in this life matters and that your good deeds will go on in God’s good world.

Bell mentions that the resurrection provides a new birth and a fresh start for this world. He calls it a day of “apologies and fresh starts.” Because of the resurrection, we can die to bad things and rise to good things. Bell maintains that the resurrection disrupts the ruts of our lives by canceling our debts and freeing us to live as new creations. According to Bell, if we live good lives and work hard enough, we will be rewarded. The message of the resurrection, for Bell, is not a celebration of the fact that we will rise with Christ in the end but rather the proclamation of the renewing of God’s good creation.

This Easter sermon is problematic for several reasons. First, it’s difficult to imagine preaching on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and never mentioning that his death paid the penalty for the sins of those who receive him as Lord. In fact, it seems that Bell purposely avoids discussing the fact that the resurrection is the announcement that sin has

²⁷Rob Bell, “The Resurrection,” Mars Hill Bible Church, April 4, 2010 [on-line]; accessed 8 April 2010; available from <http://www.marshill.org/pastteachings.org>; Internet.

been defeated. He did briefly quote Paul: “O death where is thy sting, O grave where is your victory.” However, Paul’s quote is not made in the context of one’s sins being remitted but rather in the context of all of creation being restored and everything being made right again. He also mentions that now all our bad deeds are put to death and rise up to the good with the resurrection of Jesus. He states that on the cross the debt of our bad deeds was paid, but gives no explanation as to how it was paid, what the debt actually entails, or what one’s response must be in order to receive this cancellation of debt.

Throughout his message on the resurrection, there is no presentation of the gospel. Bell does not talk about the death of Jesus atoning for the sins of those who acknowledge him. For Bell, the good news is that now all things will be renewed. While Bell uses the biblical text, he does not make any effort to exegete it. Instead of focusing on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, Bell points out that God begins the process of restoring creation with Christ’s resurrection announcing that life matters and that this world matters.

Another disturbing thing about Bell’s sermon is his reference to Christ’s resurrection appearances. Bell flippantly comments that if one must insist on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, then one must acknowledge that Christ’s post-resurrection body was completely different than the one he possessed during his life and ministry. Bell maintains that since neither Mary, the disciples at Emmaus, nor the disciples whom Jesus appeared to recognized him, he must have had a body that was different from his earlier one. The most disturbing thing here is not the contention that Jesus looked different (although I believe that Jesus veiled their eyes from seeing the truth until the time was right) but rather Bell’s questioning of the bodily resurrection of Christ. Although he never states that he denies the bodily resurrection, his comment casts doubt on his

position.

Finally, Bell's vagueness in dealing with what Christ accomplished at the cross demonstrates his continual redefining of the truth of salvation. As mentioned elsewhere, Bell believes that all are made righteous at the cross and must now live life within that reality. Such a mindset explains why Bell does not focus on the issue of sin, the need for repentance, nor the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The focus of the gospel for Bell is not that Jesus died on the cross to atone for the sins of those who would receive him, but rather that God was at work through Jesus to restore his good creation and liberate the oppressed and afflicted.

Furthermore, Bell's understanding of the resurrection calls into question the authority of Scripture. Scripture plainly presents the resurrection as the hope of all believers. Paul speaks of that hope of the resurrection in his letter to the Romans, "[I]t will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:23-25). Paul does not speak of the resurrection as referring to a restoring or renewing of creation but rather as the means by which God justifies sinners. The glory of the resurrection is not that the created order is being restored, but that mankind can be made right with God. In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses the end result of the resurrection: "For as by a man came death, by man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22). Paul is very clear that the result of the resurrection is that mankind, who was dead, can now be made alive because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Contrary to Bell's assertion that the resurrection transcends life after death, God's Word states that the resurrection proclaims the possibility of life after death. Bell's attempt to make the resurrection about the created order and our

environment demonstrates that he rejects the authority of Scripture.

Brian McLaren

Another revisionist preacher whose sermons redefine truth and displace authority is Brian McLaren. McLaren's preaching style takes its cue from culture and then brings culture to bear on the biblical text in an attempt to extract a new and better meaning. McLaren's sermons are more like stories or conversations than messages. Like Bell, McLaren embraces a narrative theology in which there are many stories that illustrate the meaning of the biblical text and at times redefine it. His use of the abductive method of preaching is evident in that he often seeks to take the listeners on a journey with little concern for bringing out the main points of the text. This methodology fits well with the postmodern mindset that detests linear thinking and propositional truths.

McLaren utilizes various styles in his preaching. He usually begins with an event in culture, something taking place in the community, or a movie and then brings it to bear on the text, interpreting the text through the grid of the cultural event or life experience. His narrative theology has a strong liberation motif. According to McLaren, the centrality of the gospel is the kingdom of God, meaning all forms of liberation, reconciliation, and transformation. McLaren believes that the gospel is much more than salvation from one's sins. The gospel is the reconciliation of all things to God and the liberation of all those who are oppressed and afflicted. In essence, for McLaren, it is a social gospel.

McLaren's preaching is colored by his faulty theology and his desire to redefine the truth of God's Word. The sermons that were reviewed demonstrate these facts. The first sermons I review are part of a two part series entitled, "The Secret

Message of Jesus.” I chose these sermons because they communicate McLaren’s belief that the real message of the Bible is not the gospel but the kingdom of God as he understands it. This sermon series demonstrates McLaren’s questioning of the authority of Scripture and his penchant for redefining the truth of Scripture. The next sermon reviewed is, “Believing or Unbelieving,” from his series entitled “The Two Messiahs.” Here, McLaren used a dialogical method of preaching that engages the congregation. This sermon also demonstrates McLaren’s knack for telling stories and demonstrates how, like Bell, he does not address the issues of sin, salvation, or repentance. The final sermon that I review is taken from the series “God At The Movies,” in which McLaren uses various movies as the text for his sermons and then seeks to connect them with Scripture. This sermon was chosen to demonstrate McLaren’s propensity for beginning with events, experiences, or culture before moving to Scripture. In this series, McLaren interprets Scripture through the grid of the movies.

“The Secret Message of Jesus.” In “The Secret Message of Jesus,”²⁸

McLaren argues that the central theme of the Christian message is the kingdom of God. In this sermon, McLaren does not cite a specific biblical text for his message; instead, he moves from various texts to provide what he sees as evidence in support of his new understanding of the gospel. According to McLaren, the Bible is not concerned with one’s destination after this life but rather with the ongoing creative project of which one is now part of.

McLaren’s kingdom message is one of liberation, reconciliation, and

²⁸Brian D. McLaren, “The Secret Message of Jesus, Part 1,” Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, DC, July 2, 2006 [on-line]; accessed 05 April 2007; available from http://www.crcc/messages/2006/7-2_secret-message-jesus-part-1; Internet.

transformation. He presents the gospels as being about Jesus liberating people from the systems of oppression in the world. His sermon is an analysis of the world's problems which he then applies to the biblical story, creating a gospel that has liberation from greed, injustice, racial prejudice, and hatred as its focus. In his interpretation of the message of the kingdom, McLaren nowhere indicates that one needs to be liberated from the sin that separates man from God. He argues that the very fact that one exists is enough, stating that "God loves them and they are enough for His kingdom."²⁹ Thus, in McLaren's new understanding of the biblical message, sin is not an issue; all are accepted into God's inclusive kingdom.

This secret message of Jesus also means the reconciliation of all things. McLaren proposes that since all things rest under the authority of one, then all things will be reconciled to God. For McLaren, this reconciliation does not refer primarily to our individual sins. He does not even address the sin that separates us from God. Instead, McLaren focuses on the global sins of injustice, racism, hatred, and oppression. According to McLaren, this secret message is one that calls upon all people to be reconciled and to bring peace to one another through lives of sacrifice and service.

McLaren's new understanding of the message of the gospel culminates in the transformation of the whole world. According to McLaren, one must gain a new understanding on the gospel centered on Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God. He sees this secret message of Jesus as stepping away from concern with our personal relationship with God and our concern for personal sins and focusing more on global sin and oppression and the need to bring global transformation.

²⁹Ibid.

While some may explain McLaren's methodology as merely liberation theology that is narrative in nature, this is not the case here. McLaren clearly espouses a liberation theology, but his narrative form does not follow any biblical narratives. He simply weaves his stories from culture, life experiences, and his own perspective into a few, selected biblical references. McLaren does not provide a biblical text from which his message derives; instead, he derives his message from outside the text.

In McLaren's understanding of the gospel, the issue is not whether you are saved or not; the issue is the kingdom of God. When McLaren says that the very fact that one exists is enough because God loves them and they are enough for his kingdom, he opens the door for a universalistic gospel that is not present in the text. However, since McLaren minimizes the significance of sin and salvation as opposed to his kingdom agenda, this step towards universalism is not a problem for him.³⁰ While minimizing the significance of sin and salvation may not be a problem for McLaren, this is very problematic for biblical preaching. The only way in which one could minimize the significance of sin and salvation is to redefine the truth of the central message of the gospel and to deny the authority of Scripture.

Another example of McLaren's redefining of truth and displacing the authority of Scripture is evident in his understanding that the gospel culminates in the transformation of the world. While this may sound acceptable at first, one has to understand exactly what McLaren means. When he states that Christians need to rewrite the contract centered on Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God, he declares that the contract centered on the gospel that traditional evangelical Christians have long

³⁰Ibid.

embraced is no longer sufficient. McLaren states that Christians need to step away from being concerned with a personal relationship with God and their present sins and start focusing on global sins and oppression.³¹

McLaren's statement belies his personal agenda of focusing on a concern for the world and global unity over and above concern for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. While I agree with McLaren concerning the need to transform our world, the world can only be transformed as individuals experience a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and deal with their personal sins so that they can receive the righteousness of God and change their world. The message of the Gospels is not a message addressing global sin and oppression but rather one that deals with each person's individual sins. Jesus, John the Baptist, Peter, John, and the disciples all preached the need for salvation from one's personal sins. Jesus not only healed the sick, but he often forgave their sins. John the Baptist came preaching, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Likewise, Peter, John, and the disciples preached a message of repentance, calling upon the people to turn to Jesus and be baptized. Their message was a clear call to turn from one's personal sins and turn to God.

In this sermon, McLaren approaches the text with the presupposition that the central truth of the Bible is that God wants to recreate the earth and bring social justice and reconciliation to all things. The gospel, for McLaren, is not focused on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of those who acknowledge him. Without a strong reference to the biblical text or an adequate exposition of the text, McLaren makes himself the authority that determines its meaning.

³¹Ibid.

“The Secret Message of Jesus –Part Two.” In his second sermon, “The Secret Message of Jesus,”³² McLaren contends that the traditional evangelical church’s view of Scripture is faulty because it believes the central message of the Bible is how to get into heaven. McLaren contends that the church has been given the wrong lid to the puzzle called the Bible; the picture does not match what is inside. He begins his message by sharing about Jesus’ first message in his hometown when He announces, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). He then snidely remarks that the puzzle lids used by the church today reads, “I have a message for those who think right, believe right and do right going to heaven, and those who don’t are going to hell.”³³ Here, McLaren stereotypes the traditional evangelical church as believing that all that matters is whether one is in or out.

McLaren states that Jesus was saying, “I am here, but it is not what you expect. I have come to bring good news to the poor. I do not fit in your boxes.”³⁴ In order to demonstrate that Jesus does not fit in our boxes, McLaren interprets the account of Jesus’ discussion with the rich young ruler. McLaren argues that when the ruler asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, he was not asking about salvation or life after death, but how to live a life of eternal significance, a just life in the midst of the mundane. McLaren states that the traditional lid says that when Jesus tells him “to sell all he has and give to

³²Brian D. McLaren, “The Secret Message of Jesus, Part Two,” Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, DC, July 30, 2006 [on-line]; accessed 05 April 2007; available from http://www.crcc/messages/2006/7-30_secret-message-jesus-part-2; Internet.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

the poor and he will have treasures in heaven and come and follow me,” Jesus is saying your greed keeps you out of heaven. However, McLaren believes this is not the case. Instead, he believes Jesus is saying, that if one wants to be a part of Jesus’ kingdom then one must understand that Jesus is about setting captives free and helping the poor. According to McLaren, the kingdom of God is about joining Jesus in his project in working for the poor and the oppressed. He states that the rich young ruler refuses to defect from the oppressive system and join Jesus in his project to liberate the oppressed.

McLaren’s sermon is problematic from the start. He begins with an illustration about trying to put together a puzzle when the lid has been switched with another box. McLaren compares this switch to the traditional church. He says that the church has been interpreting the Bible incorrectly because it has been given the wrong picture of what the Bible means. According to McLaren, the notion that the central thrust of the biblical message is centered on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross is a faulty notion. He argues that Jesus’ message was not about salvation from sin but about setting the oppressed free and helping the poor.

Although McLaren attempts to distance himself from a social gospel by stating, “You can’t have a social kingdom without a personal relationship with the King and you cannot have a relationship and not have a relationship with the social kingdom,”³⁵ his entire message emphasizes the need for a social gospel and gives no mention to the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. In fact, McLaren interprets Jesus’ response to the ruler as meaning one should join Jesus in his social project of liberating those in captivity and helping the poor. In his first sermon on “The Secret Message of Jesus,” McLaren

³⁵Ibid.

even states that Christians must sidestep the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus and the call to repent of personal sins for a greater concern for global sins.³⁶

Therefore, although McLaren indicates that one cannot focus exclusively on the social aspect of the gospel, that is precisely what he does.

McLaren's whole approach to this sermon indicates that he is setting out to redefine truth. As he redefines the truth of the gospel to mean the social aspect of the kingdom of God rather than the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he rejects two of the three sources of authority which he embraces. As mentioned elsewhere, McLaren believes there are three sources of authority: the Bible, Christian tradition, and culture. In redefining the truth of the gospel, McLaren rejects the authority of Scripture along with the authority of Christian tradition, which acknowledges the gospel as the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

“Believing or Unbelieving.” Another example of McLaren's preaching is seen in “Believing or Unbelieving,”³⁷ a sermon which comes from his series, “Two Messiahs.” In this sermon, McLaren does not give a specific text, though he mentions he would share stories from the fifth and sixth chapters of the Gospel of Mark. He begins by sharing a story about Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac. His approach in this sermon is different than the approach he utilizes in his series, “The Secret Message of Jesus.” In this sermon, McLaren uses a conversational approach very similar to the one employed by Doug Pagitt. McLaren asks questions of the congregation concerning the

³⁶McLaren, “The Secret Message of Jesus, Part One.”

³⁷Brian D. McLaren, “Believing or Unbelieving,” Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, DC, August 8, 2008; accessed on 14 January 2009; available from <http://www.crcc.org/node/661>; Internet.

demoniac and solicits their response. He asks for their impressions of the encounter and spends about twenty-five minutes discussing the state of the demoniac and acknowledging the opinions of his listeners.

Throughout the first part of the sermon, the people in the congregation talk almost as much as he does. They shout out comments and offer viewpoints, opinions, and questions throughout the message. When McLaren asks the congregation why the people in the story ask Jesus to leave after he sent the demons into the pigs and they ran off the cliff, he receives numerous answers and affirms each of them as equally true.

Once he finishes the story of the demoniac, McLaren tells the story concerning Jairus' daughter and how the story of the woman who had been subject to continual bleeding intersects the story of Jairus' daughter. McLaren notes that when Jairus heard that his daughter had died, he turns to Jesus; Jesus tells him just to believe. Likewise, McLaren points out that this woman who was subject to bleeding episodes was healed because of her faith.

McLaren links these stories together, noting that the demoniac was a man on the margins of society, forgotten and shunned, while Jairus was a man of stature and prominence, respected and admired. But, they both had a problem. In the same manner, McLaren points out how one woman had been sick twelve years with a secret, while another young lady was twelve years old.

Finally, McLaren points out the role of the crowds in each of the stories. The crowds in the Gerasenes could not control the demoniac and sent Jesus away. The crowd that gather around Jairus brushed up against Jesus but nothing happened to them. Finally, the crowds at the house of the little girl rushed out of her room, because they knew she must be dead. McLaren closes his sermon by noting that Christians are all in the story

somewhere. McLaren asserts that, “faith takes you out of the crowd and into the story. Jesus is walking through the world and we are looking for Him, we must reach out and touch Him.”³⁸

McLaren’s sermon is a mixture of conversational preaching and storytelling. In the first half of his sermon, McLaren involves his listeners in the sermonic process. This methodology is disconcerting in that it was more like an open forum than the proclamation of God’s Word. McLaren continually seeks the feedback of his congregation. At one point, when he offers a comment after several had spoken, McLaren makes it clear that his response was not any more accurate than those of his listeners. During the first twenty minutes of the sermon, McLaren does not preach; he simply facilitates discussion.

Later in the sermon, McLaren retells the two stories concerning the Gerasene demoniac and the illness of Jairus’ daughter. When he does this, he demonstrates his skills in storytelling. One could detect an emphasis on the theme that each Christian has a story and that all of our stories matter; in fact, deep down our stories are very much alike. McLaren demonstrates how he believes these stories are linked together. As he describes the various characters in the stories, he asks his congregation, “Which are you?” For McLaren, the difference between the crowds and the main characters of the story who are touched by Jesus is their level of belief. He closes his sermon by telling the church that faith takes you out of the crowd and into the story. McLaren states that Jesus is still walking through our world, waiting for us to come to him and move out of the crowd.

McLaren tells a good story but leaves out the climax of Mark 5. He does a masterful

³⁸Ibid.

job of relating the events that transpired in the text, but he did not even hint at how one receives Jesus as Lord or where faith comes from. When Jesus tells the woman who suffers from continual bleeding episodes, “Your faith has made you well,” it suggests both a physical and spiritual healing. The Greek word σωζω can mean “rescue or save from eternal death.”³⁹ (e.g., Mark 2:5). Her faith was coupled with her faith in him for salvation.

Another problem with the sermon is McLaren’s conversational approach, which solicits responses from his congregation throughout the first twenty-five minutes. As he embraces each response that was presented, he fosters a pluralistic approach to truth in which everyone’s view is correct. He does not redirect a conversation or offer a definitive answer to what the text under discussion means. McLaren’s sermon redefines the truth of Scripture by adopting a pluralistic approach to truth and by ignoring the centrality of the gospel.

Likewise, the authority of the text is compromised by McLaren’s conversational style because he acknowledges the responses of the congregation as equally valid. While some may argue that McLaren was simply engaging the crowd in his sermon, when one takes into consideration his approach to the biblical text as spelled out in his book, *A New Christianity*, one sees the direction he is going. McLaren makes it clear in his writing that he does not accept the biblical text as a “constitution” to be upheld but sees it as a community library to be interpreted by the community of faith.⁴⁰ His emphasis on the community as partners in interpretation and his pluralistic tendencies

³⁹F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), s.v. “σωζω.”

⁴⁰McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 80-86.

regarding the doctrines of the faith both influence his approach to preaching. In this light, one can see how McLaren seeks to unite everyone's story into the story of Scripture so that everyone feels accepted.

“Bruce Almighty.” McLaren preaches a series of messages called “God in the Movies,” a series of twenty messages preached at different times over a three-year period. Each of his sermons in this series follows the same approach. He begins with the movie selected, gives extensive detail, and then shows how the movie depicts what is presented in Scripture. The problem with this approach is that instead of beginning with the biblical text and seeking to discover the intended meaning, McLaren starts with the movie and then interjects the themes into Scripture. While such an approach could be deemed valid as long as the biblical parallels are accurate, the parallels in these are not valid.

One of the sermons from this series that addresses the nature of God is “Bruce Almighty.”⁴¹ Like all the messages from this series, the sermon is more of an exposition of the movie than of the biblical text. McLaren works hard to set the stage for the movie clips he shows, giving information about the director of the movies, setting the scene in the context of the movie, and even helping the hearer understand the circumstances surrounding the scene. However, McLaren spends very little time setting the context of Scripture. In fact, he merely states that in Psalm 88, David gets angry at God just like Bruce does in the movie, *Bruce Almighty*. The text given is simply a reference point upon which McLaren hangs his analysis of the movie.

⁴¹Brian D. McLaren, “Bruce Almighty,” Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, DC, November 14, 2004 [on-line]; accessed 05 April 2007; available from http://www.crcc/messages/2004/11-14_bruce-almighty; Internet.

The thrust of the sermon is that God is inviting us into a friendship with him. He wants to relate with us and invites us to join in the rhythm of his work. One would expect the expositor of a biblical text to share some insight revealed by the text. McLaren, however, opts for a different route. Instead of expositing the intended meaning of the text, he exposit what he perceives to be the intended meaning of the movie. His method of arriving at the meaning of the movie is intriguing. He calls up the producer (author) of the movie and discusses what each scene was attempting to convey. He wanted to make sure that the insights that he was sharing from the movie were consistent with those shared by the producer. One wonders why McLaren felt obligated to search out the author of the movie to understand its meaning but felt no compulsion to search for the intended meaning of the biblical text. If he had investigated the biblical text with the same concern for consistency in meaning as he did the movie, then he might have had a sermon that was spoken by God instead of one spoken by Hollywood.

According to McLaren, “Bruce Almighty” gives us three options to understand God’s relationship with the universe: God the puppet master, God the genie, and God the relater. In the first option, McLaren says God makes Christians do His bidding, and they must comply with his will. McLaren notes that such a view of God is faulty and leads to frustration and rage. The second option presents God as one who bows to the wishes of believers. This option is discounted as a false view of God. The last option is the one McLaren believes rightly pictures God as one who gives us power to learn, choose, and to grow.

This sermon is problematic on a number of fronts. McLaren does not expound the biblical text in this passage but merely relates ideas gained from a movie. Based on the theological foundation of preaching, this sermon fails from the start because McLaren

does not declare what God has spoken. He begins with a movie and seeks to explain Scripture in light of that movie, using parallels that are inaccurate. Since he provides an exposition of the movie instead of the biblical text one cannot see the truth or the authority of Scripture. He refers to a clip from the movie in which Bruce is angry with God. McLaren then states that Bruce turned to God with his rage and frustration instead of running away from God, indicating that this is a proper response. The problem with this assessment is that throughout the movie Bruce is never pictured as one who has a relationship with God or is even seeking God. Not only does McLaren fail to properly exegete the biblical text, but he also reinterprets Bruce's actions in the movie to fit more clearly with the intention of his message.

Doug Pagitt

Another prominent revisionist preacher within the emerging church is Doug Pagitt. He is noted for his outspoken disdain for traditional evangelical preaching. He has implemented a new approach to preaching that is more conversational. He calls this preaching methodology “progressional dialogue.”

In this approach to preaching, the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and listeners. Changes are made to the content as a result of their relationship.⁴² Pagitt offers this method because he believes that preaching is broken. In fact, he refers to traditional preaching as “speaching”⁴³ because what generally takes place is that the preacher lectures the

⁴²Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 23.

⁴³Pagitt uses the term “speaching” to refer to the relationship that the presenter has to both the listener and the content of the message. He notes that the presenter controls the content, the speed, and the conclusion of the presentations without any input from the listener. According to Pagitt, this control by the presenter is why preaching does not work. See Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 21-23.

congregation while they listen passively. He concedes that “speaching” can be used in very small doses but warns against a regular diet of this methodology. Pagitt states, “Weekly speaching functions like a repetitive stress disorder for both preacher and parish. Occasional usage likely won’t hurt anyone, but to make a regular practice of speaching may well be an act of relational violence, one that is detrimental to the very communities we are seeking to nurture.”⁴⁴

Pagitt insists that his progressional dialogue is not about technique. He contends that he is not talking about a new method but rather a different hermeneutic.⁴⁵ Pagitt suggests using a relational hermeneutic, a hermeneutic of community where nothing, not even the Bible, is privileged over the community in discovering and living out truth. For those in Pagitt’s church, the Bible is simply one of the conversation partners.⁴⁶

In progressional dialogue, the preaching moment becomes a conversation with the community of believers in which the pastor is more of a group facilitator than a preacher. He may say something that prompts a response that leads to another response. In this methodology, the meaning of the biblical text is created as everyone offers their insight from life experiences and personal beliefs.⁴⁷ Pagitt explains that this format is exciting and has unexpected twists and turns. This exchange of viewpoints leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas.

⁴⁴Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 25-26.

⁴⁵Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 145.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined*, 52.

I have chosen to critique two of Pagitt's sermons, "Good Friday" and "Faith in the Inventive Age," that he delivers in the more traditional approach to assess his methodology. I have also selected three other sermons that are examples of progressional dialogue: "Humanity," "Peter and Cornelius," and "Kingdom Perspective." In these sermons, Pagitt involves his congregation and uses other media to engage his listeners in his conversational format. These talks demonstrate his hermeneutic of community in which the voice of the community is privileged over both the Scriptures and church tradition.

"Good Friday." Pagitt preached "Good Friday" while speaking at a convocation at Baylor University on April 8, 2009.⁴⁸ His message was part of a holy week celebration at Baylor. Pagitt did not even bring a Bible with him. He simply recounted some of the events of the passion of Christ and connected them with people going through intense pain and suffering. He shared how Jesus reached out to the untouchables and how he was the champion of the "losers" and the "beaten." He challenged the students to follow Jesus' example.

Since Pagitt did not have a Bible with him, it is not surprising that he did not have a biblical text upon which to base his message, though he framed his message on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Pagitt mentioned that Jesus died on the cross, but did not spend any time elaborating on this fact. He focused on the fact that one could not be a part of the resurrection story unless he was a part of the death story. For him, the cross symbolizes the need to die to all those things that stand in opposition to God. Once one

⁴⁸Doug Pagitt, "Good Friday," Baylor University Chapel, April 8, 2009. [on-line]; accessed 15 November 2009; available from <http://www.edge.baylor.edu/media/85806.mp4>; Internet.

dies to those evil systems, one experiences a new life. Pagitt proclaimed that the world of pain in which people live can be replaced by a new life. The resurrection, for Pagitt, announces to the suffering that a better world is coming. He took this one step further when he stated that in the 1860s, when blacks wrote the song, “Were You There,” they lived out the crucifixion, they experienced pain and would receive resurrection promises. He concluded by stating that Jesus’ Story asks the question: Are you in places where injustice happens?

Pagitt preaches on the passion of Christ without making mention of the Christ’s sacrifice. He does not explain the reason for the crucifixion, the need for repentance, or Christ’s substitutionary atonement. Instead, he talks about injustice and suffering, pain and heartache, loss and evil as things one needs to die to so that one can have a new and fuller life. For Pagitt, the resurrection story is all about changing one’s behavior and fighting for the marginalized and oppressed. However, he never once explains how one can be changed.

In his sermon, Pagitt casts doubt on his belief in the authority of Scripture by not even bringing a Bible with him into the pulpit. He also demonstrates a disregard for the Bible’s authority by ignoring the intended meaning of the Passion narrative and reinterpreting it to fit his purposes. In telling the story of Jesus, he distorts the truth of the gospel by omitting the fact that Jesus died a substitutionary death for all those who would acknowledge him as Lord and Savior. Furthermore, Pagitt encourages students to proclaim to those in pain that a better day is coming, but fails to mention that this better day is only possible through faith in Christ.

“Faith in the Inventive Age.” The second of Pagitt’s sermons—“Faith in the

Inventive Age”–was delivered at Visible Church in Amity, New York.⁴⁹ In this sermon, Pagitt gives his text as Mark 1 but does not read the text and only refers to it briefly at the beginning. He uses Jesus’ calling of weak disciples to show that there are no prerequisites to following Jesus. He argues that Jesus picked those that no one else would have picked. Pagitt’s point is that no one is left out in the call to follow Jesus.

As Pagitt continues his sermon, he leaves the text and informed the hearers that he is going to share his ideas from his new book with them. From this point on, he lectures the congregation about how the church must change with each age in order to thrive. His earlier comments about Jesus having no prerequisites for those who would follow him fit in well with his arguments concerning how the church must adapt. For Pagitt, it is significant that Jesus required no formal beliefs, no propositional truths, and no cold doctrine to be his follower.

According to Pagitt, the church is transitioning between the information age and the inventive age. He believes that with each transition the church has to change not only the methods that were particular to the past age but also the message, doctrine, and beliefs of that age. He notes that the call to repent in Mark is the same call given to churches in this inventive age. He calls upon the church to update its faith because there is no reward for being nostalgic and no benefit to our faith being from another time. He articulates the belief that the church must be open to changing their values, beliefs, and the tools they use to communicate their message.

This sermon fails to pass for a biblical exposition in numerous ways. Pagitt makes no effort to exposit the text. When he begins his sermon he moves immediately

⁴⁹Doug Pagitt, “Faith in the Inventive Age,” Visible Church, Amity, New York [on-line]; accessed on 10 January 2010; available from <http://www.visiblechurch.org/sermons.html>; Internet.

into a running commentary on his new book. The remainder of his sermon consists of sharing the ideas of how the church must adapt to the age in which it exists to be successful. Since Pagitt's message was based on his own ideas and philosophies of church and ministry, he ignores the Bible and he becomes the authority.

I find it ironic that one who believes that the traditional method of preaching is broken uses the traditional approach in his speaking. Pagitt is very critical of a preaching style in which there is one speaker and the listeners simply have to accept what he says, yet, as he shares his ideas from his new book, he takes on the role of the expert enlightening the listener.

“Humanity.” Pagitt demonstrates his progressional dialogue in “Humanity,”⁵⁰ which he preached at the Upper Room in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He begins his sermon by introducing himself and the manner in which he normally preaches. He shares how he normally preaches in a room with couches and chairs all around and him sitting in the middle. Pagitt shares that he will involve the congregation in the sermon as he continues. He begins his sermon by listing the various forms of media that he will use throughout his conversation. He further notes that he will be referring to personal life experiences as well as television programs and interactions with religious people to clarify his theme.

Pagitt plays the song, “Human of the Year,” by Regina Spektor. He then asks for responses from the congregation. Pagitt agrees with their responses and thanks them for their reflections. Throughout the sermon, he continues to solicit reflections, responses, and insights from his listeners.

⁵⁰Doug Pagitt, “Humanity,” The Upper Room, Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 16, 2009 [online]; accessed 15 April 2010; available from <http://uminneapolis.org/mediaSermons.php?year=2009>; Internet.

Pagitt then shares some events from his experience as a landlord and how he had dealt with lousy tenants who often left things in a mess. He indicates that it was difficult for him to see these people as individuals made in the image of God. After these reflections, Pagitt notes how his interactions with some religious people leaves him feeling less than human at times. He poses the question, “What does it mean to be a human when a Christian tells you being a human is not enough for God?”⁵¹ Pagitt shares that it bothers him that some religious people indicate that they are not good enough for God as they are, they need an upgrade of some sort before God will accept them.

After telling his life experiences, Pagitt gives his text as Matthew 8:5-13 and Matthew 15:21-28. In Matthew 8, Pagitt relays the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Roman Centurion, pointing out that the centurion represented the oppression of the Jewish people and was the least likely person for the Jews to like. Pagitt finds it intriguing that this enemy of the Jews is the one in whom Jesus finds a faith unlike that found anywhere else. Pagitt then turns quickly to Matthew 15 and notes Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman. He points out the difficulty with this passage is the rough way in which Jesus speaks to the woman. Pagitt points out that Jesus made it clear that he came for the Jews and not for her, and yet she persisted in her faith and her faith was then rewarded by Jesus healing her daughter.

From these two encounters, Pagitt concludes that there are people whom Christians determine are not right with God and could not be included as his children. However, in these passages, those people who seem not to be right with God are the ones who Jesus rewards. From this summation, Pagitt states that God includes everyone just

⁵¹Ibid.

as they are. He concludes his message by referring to his book, *A Christianity Worth Believing*. Pagitt argues against those who say that people need an upgrade to be accepted by God. He decries those who claim that man is born in a defunct state that is in need of repair. According to Pagitt, all are wonderfully created and that is enough for God. He believes that Christians should live lives with no boundaries, lives in which they accept everyone.

Pagitt's sermon contains numerous problems. The theme of his message is that being human is all that is needed to be accepted by God. He uses the stories of Jesus' encounters with the centurion and the Canaanite woman as support that God accepts us in our humanness and does not require us to change or upgrade our condition. The texts in question, Matthew 8 and Matthew 15, do not even address the issue of God accepting us as righteous. These texts deal with the compassion of Christ and his willingness to reach out to those that others would neglect. While Pagitt is correct in saying that Christians need to eliminate boundary lines and demonstrate the love of Christ to everyone, he oversteps the truth when he indicates that God does not demand a change in our lives.

In his presentation, Pagitt was torn between using his progressional dialogue and simply preaching in the traditional style. As a result, he mixes the two by involving the congregation and sharing his thoughts about the biblical text and his thoughts from his new book. Pagitt sets the stage as if he was going to speak in a conversational style, but then stops asking questions and simply shares a few of his life experiences. Since he was not preaching at his home church, Pagitt could have sensed the level of discomfort with his methodology and switched to the more traditional style of preaching. If this is the case, one is left to wonder if preaching is really broken, as Pagitt contends or if he simply

would rather engage in conversation. Pagitt changes his preaching style to one that works for him, and the one that works, interestingly enough, was the more traditional style.

Another problem with Pagitt's sermon was his redefinition of Scripture. Pagitt makes it clear that he believes that humanity is basically good and right and acceptable and that no one has a right to deny them acceptance, including God. As a result of this belief, Pagitt denies the biblical truth that man is born in sin and is depraved. He argues that man is not born with a problem but is uniquely and wonderfully human. He further contends that mankind does not need an upgrade to be accepted by God because being human is enough.

Not only did Pagitt redefine the truth of original sin, he also displaces the authority of Scripture. Pagitt does this when he uses the last half of his sermon to focus on material from his book, *A Christianity Worth Believing*. His contention that people are not born in some defunct state is not found in Scripture; rather this idea comes from Pagitt's book. Thus, Pagitt offers his analysis of the nature of man as the correct one what Scripture affirms. He supports his belief that humanity does not need to change by recounting stories of Jesus ministering to those who were seen as unapproachable. He views these accounts as evidence that God affirms humanity as they are. Such a statement moves the authority away from Scripture and places it in Pagitt's own writings.

“Kingdom Perspective.” “Kingdom Perspective” was preached at Grace Community Church in Oak Lawn, Illinois on February 22, 2010.⁵² Pastor Michael Koy introduced Pagitt by sharing that he would be preaching in a different format than they

⁵²Doug Pagitt, “Kingdom Perspective” [CD-ROM] (Grace Community Church, Oak Lawn, IL, 2010).

were accustomed to hearing. Pagitt then introduced his progressional dialogue as a sermon potluck in which everyone brings something to the table. He announced that there will be five primary speakers throughout the sermon along with the entire congregation's participation. Pagitt further announced that his texts would be Acts 2:42-47 and 1 Peter 2 then asked the congregation on the organ side of the church to focus on 1 Peter 2, while those on the piano side focused on Acts 2.

As Pagitt begins he polls the congregation to find out when they first heard the story of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. He then has them read Acts 2:1-4 together. He asks them what Pentecost means and solicits responses from various congregants. Pagitt uses the same approach with each section of the biblical text. He has the text read by someone in the church and then asks the congregation what it means and affirms their many and varied responses. Some of the people share personal experiences they have had of nervousness and fear that they feel relate to the nervousness and fear the people felt on the day of Pentecost. Pagitt tells the congregation that everything changed at Pentecost—the talkers became the listeners and the listeners became the talkers. He uses this interpretation of Pentecost as the basis for his hermeneutic. He explains that Pentecost is not an isolated event but a complete shift brought about by God in which the Spirit no longer rests on only one man but upon all.

As the congregation continues to offer responses as to the meaning of Pentecost, Pagitt prompts them to think about how they fit in the story. The people respond that in Acts 2 a communal notion of the church develops and they see the same thing happening right now in their church as the congregants have now become voices of interpretation instead of only hearers. This lays the groundwork for his community hermeneutic in which the voice of the community is privileged above all others.

After having guided the discussion of Acts 2, Pagitt directs the congregation's attention to 1 Peter 2:4-25. Pagitt had different congregants read the text. He focuses the discussion on the priesthood of believers and shares with the church that God speaks through all of us. He notes that not all the Old Testament priests felt equipped, yet God used them. In the same manner, Pagitt shares with them that God could use them also. Pagitt explains to the church that when Peter talked about believers being "living stones," he was saying that if one does not step up and speak out, God will use someone else. Pagitt then encourages the congregation to tell one another that they are all priestly pastors.

Pagitt uses the same format for 1 Peter as he does for Acts 2. Responses from the congregation varied. One shared a story about personal suffering that Pagitt said "opened his eyes to the text in a new way." Another man responded that suffering does not separate one from God. In parts of the sermon, there were as many remarks made by people in the congregation as there were by Pagitt. He closes his message by simply stating that the story of Pentecost in Acts 2 and 1 Peter 2 are clearly linked.

This sermon by Pagitt is not a sermon at all. In all fairness to Pagitt, I am not sure he intended for it to be a sermon. While he may call what he does "preaching," he really does not want to deliver a sermon. Pagitt sees himself more as a group facilitator, which is a much more accurate description. Pagitt had presented lectures on progressional dialogue the day before this sermon and his talk was intended to demonstrate what progressional dialogue looked like in a church setting.

If this is an accurate demonstration of progressional dialogue, then it falls miserably short of biblical preaching. While Pagitt does start with the biblical text, he

does not seek to determine the intended meaning of the text. Instead, Pagitt uses the text to buttress his claims that authority now rests in the community by the power of the Holy Spirit. In addition, he fails to mention the gospel (death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ). Instead he appeals to the experiences, beliefs, and thoughts of the congregants.

Pagitt's methodology is simply to have someone in the congregation read a section of the biblical text, summarize the text, and then invite thoughts, interpretations, feelings, and life experiences that might have some bearing on the text. The majority of Pagitt's comments are the affirmation of the various thoughts and meanings that are shared by members of the congregation. This methodology invites the congregants to become the authority for meaning rather than the Scripture.

Pagitt's sermon had more of the feel of a test project for his community hermeneutic than of a sermon intended to proclaim biblical truth. Ironically, he is most effective when he assumes the role of the traditional preacher. He uses the traditional preaching methodology to establish his foundation and basically tells the congregation that he believes Acts 2 brings about a major shift from one person speaking for God to everyone speaking for God. This vital point in his sermon is not discovered by the community, but by Pagitt. Only after he establishes some basic principles and plants some key points in their minds—Acts 2 and 1 Peter 2 are interlinked, Acts 2 is the cornerstone for 1 Peter 2—did Pagitt solicit responses from the congregation. While Pagitt contends that the quest for the truth of God's Word is ultimately found in the community, he still believes that he must provide the foundation for understanding his methodology for them. Pagitt reverts to the traditional approach he decries when he needs to provide the key concepts to his methodology.

Tim Conder

Conder is the founding pastor of Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina and serves on the leadership team of Emergent. Conder is an important figure in revisionist preaching because he fosters a community hermeneutic. In order to understand the hermeneutic that Conder brings to the biblical text, one must understand his beliefs. A casual study of his church website reveals Conder's understanding of the authority of Scripture greatly influences his interpretation:

The breath and life of Emmaus Way is our commitment to living in the way of Jesus and the worship of God whom we know as Father, Son, and Spirit. For us, that means an embodiment of both the teachings and life of Jesus. There are several authorities that compel us in this direction—the authority of the Scriptures, our experiences personally and collectively as those following united to Christ by God's Spirit, and the great history/narrative of an imperfect church which has nonetheless proclaimed the story of God and received God's grace throughout the centuries.⁵³

According to this statement and the materials covered in his various writings, Conder does not believe in the sole authority of Scripture. He believes in the authority of Scripture but only as one among many sources of authority.⁵⁴

When Conder approaches the biblical text he does so with the combined authorities of individual experiences, beliefs, and opinions, along with the traditional historical perspective of the church. Each of these sources of authority is considered along with the authority of Scripture and affects its meaning. Conder leads his community to demonstrate how God's Spirit works in dramatic ways by encouraging them to see themselves as co-interpreters and co-creators with whatever authority shapes

⁵³“Emmaus Way,” [on-line]; accessed 15 January 2010; available from <http://www.emmausway.net>; Internet.

⁵⁴Conder and Rhodes, *Free for All*, 43-88.

their fellowship.⁵⁵ For Conder, the issues of authority and truth are not clearly determined through Scripture but are determined through the interaction of the listening community, their shared experiences and traditions.

In this section, I have chosen sermons that demonstrate Conder's community hermeneutic and are typical of his weekly "pub meetings" at Emmaus Way. Both of these sermons, "The Rape of Dinah" and "Asking and Teaching in the Church," are more like group discussions than sermons.⁵⁶ In each of these sermons, Conder assumes the role of a group facilitator rather than a preacher. These two sermons demonstrate the presence of a very pluralistic approach to truth as well as a displacing of authority.

"The Rape of Dinah." This sermon is a combination of a group conversation in which Conder seldom speaks and a narrative sermon in which he provides biblical context to the events depicted in Genesis 34.⁵⁷ When this sermon was delivered there were ten people gathered for a pub conversation. Each person came prepared to discuss the text with a cooler of beer, some wine, and snacks. The group that gathered for the sermon included former pastors and Duke Divinity students.

Conder begins by looking at the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34. He summarizes the story, noting how Hamor the Hivite was filled with desire for Dinah and raped her. Conder notes that Hamor's action led to a series of bizarre and unthinkable responses, culminating in the vicious attack of the men of Shechem. After Conder summarizes the

⁵⁵Ibid., 53-54.

⁵⁶Conder calls their Sunday worship services "conversations." See Conder and Rhodes, *Free For All*.

⁵⁷Ibid., 89-108.

narrative, some of the group questions whether Dinah was actually raped or whether it was consensual. They question what is sexually acceptable today and what would have been unacceptable in the days of Jacob. Their discussion turns into a debate between the men and the women in the group with the men contending that Dinah knew where she was going and what she was doing, while the women argue that the text points out that this was a violent act by Hamor. During this discussion, Conder notes that he kept pushing the people to speculate abstractly as to whether or not this was rape. The disagreement subsides when the girls point to a study that shows that men are more insensitive to the horrific aspects of rape than women.⁵⁸

As the discussion of the text continues, the women voice their concern that even though the story is about Dinah, her voice is never heard. They remark that several of the men in the narrative are heard from, but Dinah is silenced. The women conclude that texts like this terrorize women and are examples of how gender limits one's ability to interpret the Bible correctly. They also point out that this gender diversity enables one to discover elements in the text that were never noticed before.

This study group was even more concerned that God was silent in the text. Since they knew that God was, and is, the hero of the Bible, they pose the question, "What do you do when the hero is not acting heroic?"⁵⁹ They rail at God at length because not only did he not protect Dinah, but he offered no word on the matter. The group continues to complain about God's inactivity and his seeming indifference to Dinah's plight.

⁵⁸Ibid., 94-96.

⁵⁹Ibid., 98.

After the group settles down, Conder interjects that he does not believe that the horrible event is the fault of Dinah or God. He argues that Jacob set this up by moving his family to the vicinity of Shechem, even though it was an evil city. He remarks that God had blessed Jacob and taken care of him on his many journeys, yet Jacob, lured by its prosperity, settled in Shechem. Since Dinah lived near Shechem, she became curious and ventured into the city where she was raped. Conder notes that her brothers' response was one of anger, vengeance, and the lust for prosperity. Conder contends that Jacob's lust for prosperity led him to move near Shechem, which placed his sons in a prime place to become prosperous, albeit through tragic and unspeakable means.

This sermon by Conder presents many problems. The first problem with this sermon is that it does not qualify as a sermon. "The Rape of Dinah" is more like a Bible study than a sermon. The setting consists of a small group of people who look at the text and offer their different viewpoints. Throughout the sermon, there is no attempt to exhort, rebuke, correct, or teach. Instead, the goal of this conversation is to allow each person to offer insight on the text in question. At no point in the sermon does Conder attempt to persuade anyone to acknowledge any specific truths of Scripture. Another problem is that although a variety of responses and insights are offered by the group, no consensus is ever reached. Moreover, Conder never corrects or redirects the discussion. When the group begins to debate their various opinions, instead of engaging in the conversation to bring clarity, Conder tries to push them into more speculative thoughts.

While there are many problems with this sermon, Conder wraps things up nicely at the end. After everyone has exhausted their thoughts concerning the text, Conder points out that God was indeed present even in the silence with his redemption

and goodness. He helped the group see that God is not the problem in the text, man is the problem. As for the group members, their methodology was guided by a feminist approach to the text in which they blamed Jacob, the brothers, and even God for the plight of Dinah. Ultimately, the main difficulty with this approach is that it incorporates a community hermeneutic that embraces everyone's ideas and gives them equal authority with the Bible, thus making themselves co-creators of meaning.

“Asking and Teaching in the Church.” The sermon, “Asking and Teaching in the Church,” addresses the issue of homosexuality. Conder views this conversation as one that sparks much controversy. The text used is Romans 1. As the group begins to discuss the issue of idolatry, culture, and homosexual relations, Conder shares with them that one in their group is a lesbian. The group then focuses their attention on Brandy who shares that she is a Christian lesbain. She notes the difficulty of finding her place in both the lesbian and gay community and the church. Conder makes it clear to everyone that Brandy is a part of their faith community and that her input greatly influences the discussion on this text.

The group discusses the cultural issues present in Romans and how that affects the interpretation of the issue of homosexuality activity. Conder notes that since he does not struggle with this issue personally, he has little fear or conviction when reading this passage. He further notes that whether or not Paul universally condemns homosexual relations here does not make much difference to him because it is clearly not a condemnation that “touches his libido.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid., 140.

The sermon takes a decided turn when the group discovers not only that Brandy is a lesbian but that two others in the group have gay siblings. The group immediately begins searching for ways to gloss over the homosexual issue and make it a cultural issue. Conder states that since they now have gay and lesbian voices in their community of faith there is much more at stake when they come to texts like Romans 1 “because the community forces us to enter into a broader range of experience with this text.”⁶¹ Conder exclaims his excitement over the fact that the group is able to discuss this topic so openly and still remain friends. However, he also notes that they did not come to any consensus on the meaning of the text.

This sermon suffers from some of the same problems as “The Rape of Dinah.” Rather than a sermon, this was largely a testimonial by Brandy. She made several statements that contradicted the truths of Scripture, but no attempt was made by Conder to correct her. In fact, she was repeatedly affirmed by the group. Brandy challenged the notion that homosexuality could be called “unnatural.”⁶² She stated that since homosexuality feels natural it should be recognized as natural. One frustrated member of the group summed up this conversation well: “I think we ran from the text this evening. Maybe instead of congratulating ourselves [on what a great job we’ve done talking through these delicate issues], maybe next time we can talk about the text!”⁶³

Conder’s sermon is a clear example of redefining the truths of Scripture to accommodate the pluralistic views of a community of faith. In this type of preaching, the

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 141.

⁶³Ibid., 139.

authority does not rest in Scripture but in the lives and experiences of the listeners. Conder notes that they learned not to render equivalent all forms of homosexual relations. Instead of recognizing this redefining of truth as an affront to the word of God, Conder sees it as a broader understanding of the text made possible by the diversity of the community.

An Effective Model of Preaching to an Emerging Culture

While the methods of preaching employed by revisionist leaders within the emerging church fail to proclaim the true gospel to an emerging culture, their sensitivity to the beliefs and methods of this culture are commendable. This postmodern culture desperately needs to be reached with the gospel; however, this cannot be accomplished by approaching the biblical text with doubt and skepticism. Such an approach leads to a continual repainting of the Christian faith and a relative view of truth. One cannot reach a confused and skeptical culture with the gospel by proclaiming a litany of uncertainties and ambiguities concerning the message of the Bible.

The revisionist leaders of the emerging church argue that traditional evangelicals focus entirely on personal salvation and eternity while neglecting to exhort their congregations to live like Jesus and join him in the restoration of creation.⁶⁴ Revisionists focus so heavily on urging their congregations to live like Jesus that they have almost completely excluded the necessity of a personal relationship with Jesus

⁶⁴Some of the key revisionist leaders contend that the traditional evangelical view of salvation is faulty because it is limited to personal salvation and fails to develop the essence of the restoring work of Christ that was to eliminate injustice, oppression, and misuse of God's creation. See McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 100-10; Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, 31-35; and Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 105-10.

Christ. Models of strong evangelical preaching in which the ideologies of the postmodern culture are addressed and yet the biblical gospel is still proclaimed, do exist. However, they demonstrate that the preacher can preach a message that is relevant to the postmodern culture without compromising its truth and authority. One example of an evangelical preacher who preaches to postmoderns while consistently anchoring his sermons in the authority and truth of Scripture is Mark Driscoll.

Mark Driscoll

Mark Driscoll is the lead teaching pastor at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. He founded the church in the fall of 1996, and it has grown to over 13,000 people with twenty-four total services in two different states—Washington and New Mexico. Driscoll is also the co-founder and president of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network, which has planted over three hundred churches in the United States and abroad. In 2007, Mars Hill Church was recognized by *Outreach* magazine as the twenty-third fastest growing church in the United States.⁶⁵ Driscoll preaches regularly to thousands of young people deeply entrenched in the postmodern culture. He bridges the gap between the culture of the Bible and the postmodern culture they are living in without compromising the truth of the Bible or silencing its authority.

One of the things that helps Driscoll manage this delicate balance is his method of sermon preparation. He begins his sermon preparation by prayerfully choosing a book of the Bible through which to preach. Once he has decided on a book, he studies it for months or years. Driscoll estimates that for a book like Genesis he spends about one

⁶⁵“Mark Driscoll,” *The Resurgence Profile* [on-line]; accessed on 16 October 2009; available from http://www.theresurgence.com/profile_mark_driscoll; Internet.

thousand hours in preparing and preaching the text.⁶⁶ His next step is to pray for the Holy Spirit to teach his Word. Driscoll believes this step is critical to the preparation process. If this area is neglected, then all the other work is in vain. As he studies the text, Driscoll notes those texts that are difficult and biting and wrestles with them until he has worked his way through them, taking special note of phrases, words, and images so that he grasps the biblical imagery that might solidify the meaning of the text in the heart of the hearers.⁶⁷ Driscoll states that it is only after having studied the texts for months and having wrestled with the difficult parts that he consults the works of trusted teachers and commentaries to make sure he has not missed the mark in his interpretation. When he delivers his sermons, Driscoll explains the text thoroughly and shares from life experiences of how the text is changing his life. He also includes stories of lives within the Mars Hill community that have been changed as a result of the power of the Word of God. He explains that he wants his congregation to know what it looks like to live a life under the authority of the Word of God.⁶⁸

Driscoll's sermons contrast greatly with those of the revisionist leaders within the emerging church. Even though they are reaching out to a similar culture, their approaches to the biblical text and the presuppositions they bring to the text are vastly different. While the revisionists approach the text with a skepticism that questions its authority and denies its truth, Driscoll comes to the biblical text with full confidence in

⁶⁶Mark Driscoll, *Reflections on Preaching* [on-line]; accessed on 4 February 2010; available from http://www.theresurgence.com/markdriscoll_2006-06.reflection-on-preaching; Internet.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

the sole authority of Scripture and an understanding that the truth revealed in Scripture corresponds directly with reality.⁶⁹ Driscoll is also passionate about every sermon being centered in Jesus Christ. Whereas, in most revisionist sermons the finished work of Jesus is not even mentioned, Driscoll's sermons echo this theme throughout. Driscoll is very clear that people are separated from God due to their sin and unless they repent of their sin and acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, they will spend eternity in hell.

I have chosen three of Mark Driscoll's sermons to demonstrate his approach to the biblical text. The first sermon that I review is the sermon "Trial: Perseverance Until Judgment." This sermon is one in a series of twenty-eight messages dealing with the books of 1 and 2 Peter. This sermon demonstrates Driscoll's penchant for expositing the biblical text, having discovered the intended meaning of the biblical author. This sermon further demonstrates the way in which Driscoll approaches preaching through a book of the Bible, and how he centers his content on the cross of Jesus Christ. The next two sermons that I have included in this work are: "Cross: God Dies" and "Image: God Loves." These two sermons are from a thirteen part series on doctrine. This doctrine series is a prerequisite for membership at Mars Hill Church. I chose to review these two sermons because they show how Driscoll deals with Christ's atonement and God's love for man. These sermons demonstrate that one can address the truths of the biblical text concerning God's wrath towards sin, while still maintaining God's great love for man.

⁶⁹Mark Driscoll, "God Speaks," Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, April 27, 2008 [online]; accessed on 14 December 2008; available from <http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/doctrine>; Internet.

“Trial: Perseverance until Judgment.” In this sermon,⁷⁰ Driscoll begins by reading through the text and leading the congregation in prayer. He highlights his thesis with the statement, “Perseverance is about the last day.”⁷¹ He shares how Peter, knowing his time of departure was drawing near, calls on his brothers and sisters to persevere. Driscoll notes that although Peter had a rough start in his walk with Jesus, he stood firm.

Driscoll did an excellent job of exposing the text and revealing the areas in which Peter called upon Christians to persevere. First, he notes that Peter calls upon them to persevere in the Scriptures, and to remember the Scriptures. Driscoll uses personal illustrations to demonstrate the correlation between persevering in the Scriptures and persevering in the Christian life. Second, he shares that Peter calls upon Christians to persevere through scoffing. Driscoll points out that since there were scoffers doubting the coming of Christ that early in history, one should not be surprised that there are scoffers today. He exhorts his listeners not to let the scoffers discourage them. He encourages them by telling them that if they are persevering with Jesus, they will face scoffers. Third, Driscoll tells them that they must persevere until judgment. In this section, he deals with the reality of God. Driscoll clarifies the truths of 2 Peter 3:5-7 by establishing that God is the creator of the heavens and earth and the sustainer and keeper of heaven and earth until the judgment. He also notes that some do not like the picture of God as a judge. He points out that the sins of Christians are judged at the cross of Christ, but that the unbeliever’s sins will be judged at the judgment.

⁷⁰Mark Driscoll, “Trial: Perseverance Until Judgment,” Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, July 12, 2009 [on-line]; accessed 13 October 2009; available from <http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/trial/persevere-until-judgment>; Internet.

⁷¹Ibid.

Driscoll's sermon is a very sound biblical message that addresses the questions postmodern culture has about sin and judgment, while never compromising the truth of the gospel. His message addresses today's skepticism by presenting biblical arguments for the reality of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Judge. Throughout the message, Driscoll continually pointed his listeners to Christ and clearly presents the plan of salvation. He does not try to repaint the biblical truth to appease his postmodern crowd, nor does he apologize for God or his wrath towards sin. Driscoll centers on the truth of the gospel and preaches it without hesitation. He deals with the sin that separates man from God and demonstrates to his listeners how God pours out His wrath upon Jesus to atone for the sins of those who acknowledge him as Lord and God. Driscoll's approach to the biblical text makes it evident that he has a strong sense of the sole authority of Scripture and that he is committed to proclaiming the truth of God's Word as it was received.

“Cross: God Dies.” Another sermon by Driscoll, “Cross: God Dies,”⁷² is part of a thirteen week series on the basic beliefs of Christianity. Each person is required to go through this series before they become a member of Mars Hill. Driscoll begins this message by addressing the fact that God died on the Cross. He asks some basic questions that he uses to expose the truth of what happened on the cross: What does it mean? How does God die? Why does God die? What are the implications for us both individually and corporately? Driscoll establishes from the outset that he accepts the Scriptures as truth and that this is his guiding directive in preaching this message. While he does not

⁷²Mark Driscoll, “Cross: God Dies,” Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, March 16, 2008 [on-line]; accessed on 13 October 2009; available from <http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/doctrine/cross-god-dies>; Internet.

announce a text at the outset of his message, he deals with these various questions by explaining the events of the crucifixion as reported in the gospels and as prophesied in Isaiah 52 and 53.

Driscoll deals with the first question—How did He die?—by establishing what happened at the cross. He walks his congregation through a detailed description of what took place at the crucifixion. He uses very graphic detail, noting that this was done to give his listeners a full appreciation of what Christ endured. He highlights the shame and humiliation that Jesus endured. Driscoll not only details the events of Christ's crucifixion, but also refers to the biblical text in Isaiah 52 and 53, which foretell the events of the cross. Driscoll deals thoroughly with the issue of how Jesus died from both a historical and biblical account, contending that the truths revealed in Scriptures correspond to the events that actually transpired.

Next, Driscoll focuses on the question, “Why did He die?” He asks a bewildering question for many when he asks, “How is the fact that Jesus died good news?”⁷³ He wondered out loud how the horrid, degrading death of Jesus on the cross could be in any way declared good. Driscoll answers that question by taking his listeners on a journey of the Old and New Testaments to see what those closest to Jesus had to say about his death on the cross. He points out that in Isaiah 53:5, centuries before the crucifixion, Isaiah prophecies, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.” Driscoll points out that in each of these references the word “for” is of great significance. In Romans, Paul states that “He was delivered up to death

⁷³Ibid.

for our sins.” (Rom 4:25) and “God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). In 1 Corinthians, Paul also states that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3). Driscoll states that John confirms these testimonies when he says, “He is the propitiation for our sins . . .” (1 John 2:2). Driscoll proclaims that the death of Jesus is good news because he died for us. His death on the cross was for us.

Driscoll answers the question, “What did Jesus’ death accomplish?” by delivering an extensive biblical exposition of the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. He makes it abundantly clear that penal substitutionary atonement is the crux of Christianity. In fact, Driscoll maintains that there can be no true gospel apart from a penal substitutionary atonement. He begins in Genesis with the fall of man and moves through the Old Testament to Romans 3 to explain this key doctrine and the fact that Jesus died to take upon himself the punishment for sin that should have been ours. Driscoll acknowledges that many of the people he addresses do not want to hear about the wrath of God. He knows that they do not like to hear that they are depraved and filthy in God’s sight. However, even though he knows it is unpopular, he continues to proclaim the truth of God’s wrath toward sin. He states that he is accountable to God and the truth God has placed in his Word. Driscoll shares how through the atonement God diverted the punishment from us and placed it on Jesus. The death of Jesus removed the wrath of God away from us and our sins and placed it upon Jesus. Driscoll points out that those who were once sinful and undeserving become righteous through the blood of Christ and through their acknowledgment of him as Lord and Savior. He points out that one cannot be justified by God on one’s own merit. He reminds his listeners that their righteousness is as filthy rags before God and is comparable, in the words of Paul, to a pile of dung.

One can only be made right with God through the penal substitutionary atonement of his Son. At the cross, Driscoll declares, man's sins were placed on Jesus and, upon his faith in him, man becomes the righteousness of God. Jesus' death, according to Driscoll, accomplishes our redemption and our justification.

Finally, Driscoll explains the implication of the cross. He begins by dismissing the false understanding that the cross contradicts God's love. He refers to those who view the cross event as an example of divine child abuse. Driscoll calls this a gross misrepresentation of penal substitutionary atonement. He notes very forcefully that the cross manifests the love of God. Again, he reverts to the biblical text to support his statements (John 3:16; John 15:12-13; Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10). Each of these passages he mentions demonstrates the love of God for man. Driscoll rightly contends that apart from the cross all one has is a simple sentimental love that tells us how God feels towards him or her. But, in the cross God does something—He dies for us.

Driscoll makes the message especially personal at the end by asking his listeners bluntly if they want to become Christians and accept Jesus' death for their sin and become righteous. He shares God's plan of salvation very clearly and calls his listeners to respond. Driscoll makes sure that everyone there knows the truth of the cross as revealed in Scripture.

Driscoll's sermon is a good example of how to address a difficult topic in the midst of a people who may not accept it as true. He notes that many there do not view the cross in the way he presents it. He also remarks that many of them reject the idea that man is alienated from God, depraved, and repulsive. Furthermore, Driscoll states very clearly that man does not appreciate his explanation of the wrath of God. However,

Driscoll makes it very clear that man's opinions, beliefs, and preferences are not his consideration. His only consideration is the truth as revealed in Scripture. He does a good job of explaining the key doctrines of the cross and anchoring them in the biblical text.

While Driscoll anchors his message in the cross-event, he used a topical approach in dealing with the issues of justification, penal substitutionary atonement, propitiation, and expiation. Although he uses a topical approach through much of the sermon, he does an excellent job of addressing the context of each Scripture reference and expositing it thoroughly to get at the intended meaning of the author.

Driscoll demonstrates his belief in the sole authority of Scripture by approaching the text in a manner that rests on the Word and not on the opinions and beliefs of others. He makes no apologies for his unpopular stances concerning the cross and the wrath of God. His only explanation is that he must be true to the text. He demonstrates the truthfulness of God's Word through references to the Old Testament and showing how the Word of God corresponds to events that have actually transpired. While revisionists lean on the life experiences of others and their differing beliefs, Driscoll stands firmly on the truthfulness and authority of the Bible.

“Image: God Loves.” “Image: God loves”⁷⁴ is a sermon on Genesis 1 and deals with the question, “What are we?”⁷⁵ Driscoll demonstrates from Scripture that

⁷⁴Mark Driscoll, “Image: God Loves,” Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, April 20, 2008 [on-line]; accessed on 14 October 2008; available from <http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/doctrine/image-god-loves>; Internet.

⁷⁵Ibid.

humanity is made a little lower than God but higher than the creatures. He makes his point by arguing that God made man in his image. .

Driscoll answers the questions of many in postmodern culture when he tells them that God loves them completely and has blessed them immensely in creating them in his image. The picture of God that Driscoll paints is of a God who loves them and shares some of his attributes with them. They have been given the capacity to love, to show mercy, to offer forgiveness, to create, to reason, and to express sympathy. Driscoll continues his exposition, stating that since mankind bears the image of God, he should reflect God to the world. Driscoll calls upon the church to take up the challenge of reflecting God to the world. Finally, Driscoll points out that mankind “cracked” that image at the fall and it stands in disrepair. He then points his listeners to Jesus, the perfect image-bearer. As he does this, he shares that in order to have their image restored, they must put off the old life and take up the new life. He points them to the cross.

In this sermon, Driscoll not only demonstrates a sound biblical exposition of the biblical text, but he also dispells some of the claims made by revisionist leaders concerning traditional evangelical preaching. First, in keeping with sound exposition, Driscoll bases his message on Scripture. Driscoll anchors his message on the Word of God and preaches about God’s depiction of life. Dispelling the revisionist claims, Driscoll does not present a God who comes to man with a list of regulations to keep, nor does he focus his sermon on simply abiding by certain dogmas. His message is both biblical and relevant. Contrary to revisionist accusations, Driscoll does not simply present a message that says all you have to do is believe this list of things and you are

okay. He boldly proclaims the truths of the gospel and then tells his listeners they need to embody these truths so that the world will see the image of God. Furthermore, Driscoll is not concerned simply with one's life in heaven in the future; his message is relevant to one's life today. Yet, he still remains faithful to the authority of Scripture and does not recreate the truth.

Conclusion

The state of preaching within the emerging church is a tenuous one. Preaching by the revisionist leaders is deficient when it comes to proclaiming the biblical gospel to the listening community. This deficiency is most evident in the areas of authority and truth. The revisionists' hermeneutical approach to the biblical text reveals their deficiency. They have adopted a hermeneutic that does not acknowledge that one should begin with the intended meaning of the author of the biblical text. They opt, instead, to embrace the possibility of various meanings for the text. While various hermeneutical approaches have led to a questioning of authority and a skepticism concerning truth, the revisionist approach primarily embraces a community hermeneutic. This approach moves the sole authority away from Scripture, dividing it among Scripture, the community, and tradition. In this hermeneutic, the community becomes co-creators of meaning as well as arbiters of truth.

Revisionist preaching demonstrates the revisionist practice of displacing the authority of Scripture to the community beliefs and life experiences. Both Pagitt and Conder embrace a preaching approach that espouses a community hermeneutic that operates with the understanding that there is not a single meaning of the biblical text.

Rather, meaning is discovered, even co-created by the community of faith.⁷⁶ Pagitt and Conder encourage those gathered to offer their insights, telling them that there are no wrong answers and often asking them for better meanings than they have shared. Pagitt's progressional dialogue grants an authority to each person present and considers it meaningful to the interpretation of the biblical text. Not only does this methodology remove the sole authority from Scripture, but it also embraces a relative view of truth in which the life experiences of the community members help determine what qualifies as truth. Some of the sermons of Brian McLaren do not even begin with a biblical text. Instead, he often begins with a movie, current event, or a specific aspect of his liberation theology. Often, the biblical text is simply a passage given to vaguely support what he is addressing.⁷⁷

The preaching of the revisionist leaders cannot be considered the proclamation of the gospel. Since the gospel is the good news concerning Jesus Christ, the preaching event should be centered on Jesus. In revisionists' preaching, this is not the case. Their preaching varies in methodology but maintains several consistent themes. The focus of their preaching is on living like Jesus. They focus on embracing the kingdom of God as a day in which there is no oppression, no injustice, no hatred, no racism, and a greater

⁷⁶Pagitt thoroughly explains his methodology in dialogical preaching in his writings. See Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 170-74, 220-26. For more on community hermeneutic see also, Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free for All*, 50-66.

⁷⁷This is seen in McLaren's preaching series, *God in the Movies*, which consists of twenty-one different sermons that use popular movies as the focal point and then at times refer to a biblical text that may include similar subject matter. This is also seen in McLaren's sermon delivered at the Episcopal Convention in 2009, in which he had no biblical text. In other messages, such as McLaren's series on the story-line of the Bible in which he presents biblical history in seven episodes, he rarely gives a biblical text and often simply utilizes his narrative theology to weave his version of the biblical story. See Brian McLaren, "Creation." Emergent Podcast, 31 March 2009 [on-line]; accessed 14 August 2009; available from <http://www.emergent.com/podcast/mcclarencast>; Internet.

concern for the environment. While all these concerns are admirable, the revisionist preachers fail to acknowledge that these changes to our world can only take place when people's lives are dramatically transformed as a result of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In the over one hundred sermons that I reviewed, there was seldom a reference to the cross of Jesus, nor an acknowledgment of the need for the repentance for sins or the substitutionary atonement. In those rare sermons where the cross was mentioned, it was dealt with either vaguely and hurriedly or presented as an accomplished fact for us in which we did not have to respond in any given way. Not only is this avoidance of the cross evident in their preaching, these revisionist preachers have also indicated these beliefs in their writings.

While revisionist leaders claim that culture is changing rapidly and the church needs to adjust its methods and message, their claims that expository preaching is too predictable and ineffective in reaching the postmodern culture are simply false. Revisionists argue that one cannot stand on the same unchanging truth and be effective in reaching a culture that is always changing. I believe they have misread the problem in reaching our culture. One cannot hope to reach an indecisive and ever-changing culture with a gospel message that is just as indecisive. If the preacher wants to rescue the drifting postmodern culture, he must give them the sure anchor of God's Word, backed by his full authority and revealing a truth that corresponds to reality.

Many traditional evangelical preachers are effectively communicating the Word of God to a postmodern culture without compromising the authority of God's Word or redefining its truth. Mark Driscoll is a solid example of a preacher deeply entrenched in the postmodern culture yet, still standing on the sole authority of God's Word and

proclaiming its truth without apology. Driscoll presents the gospel of Jesus every time he preaches, reminding people of the realities of judgment and hell, while imploring the church to be the image-bearers God has called them to be. As a result of his faithfulness to the Word and his reliance upon the Holy Spirit, Mars Hill continues to grow and lives continue changing.

The answer for reaching the postmodern culture with the biblical gospel is to retain a firm belief in the sole authority of Scripture and an unflinching determination to cling to the truth revealed in Scripture. In order to retain these foundational principles, the preacher must approach the biblical text with humility, place himself under the authority of Scripture, and continually search for the intended meaning of the biblical author. The preacher must also have a firm conviction, imparted by the Holy Spirit, that the truths revealed in Scripture are unchanging and he must live his life according to those truths. The message preached must have Christ as its centerpiece and present Him as the substitutionary atoning sacrifice that reconciles those who acknowledge Him by faith in God. In order to reach a postmodern culture that is flourishing in a spirit of skepticism, one must proclaim the biblical gospel, anchoring the message in the authority of Scripture and the steadfastness of God's truth.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

The revisionists within the emerging church are passionately trying to reach the postmodern culture. They have studied the culture, learned their philosophies, and adapted their methods in an effort to present a relevant message. These leaders are to be commended for their commitment to understanding the culture in which they are ministering. However, the message they proclaim is not the gospel as presented in the Bible.

Unfortunately, in their efforts to reach the postmodern culture, they have changed not only the methods of proclamation but the message itself. A careful analysis of the hermeneutics and preaching of the revisionists reveals that their methodologies redefine truth and displace the authority of Scripture. The revisionists have rejected Scripture as solely authoritative for a view that distributes authority among tradition, culture, and Scripture. Not only have they displaced the authority of Scripture, but they also have redefined the truth of Scripture to cohere with their existing set of beliefs and preferences.

My analysis of revisionist preaching began with a study of preaching within both the emerging church and the traditional evangelical church. This analysis compared and contrasted the meaning, role, and methodology of preaching that exists within both

churches. The different views of preaching reveal a strong postmodern influence within the revisionists' ideology. Their rejection of propositional truth is apparent in their emphasis on preaching as dialogue and conversation as well as their reliance on community beliefs.

The emerging church has been greatly influenced by postmodernism's understanding of truth and authority. The fact that the emerging church arose as a protest against the traditional evangelical emphasis on absolute truth, authority, and modernist thinking attests to the influence of postmodernism on the movement. Postmodernism's rejection of authority and denial of truth claims is evident in the writings and preaching of the revisionist leaders of the emerging church.

This denial of truth and displacement of authority is also evident in the theological beliefs of the revisionist leaders. While many evangelicals differ over the doctrine of Scripture, the revisionists rework it so that it becomes more elastic and inclusive. They reject the clear teaching of Scripture, opting instead for a view that is more palatable to their specific preferences. If the truth, as revealed in Scripture, does not cohere with the beliefs that they currently possess, they reject that truth and redefine it so that it fits their belief system.¹ For the revisionists, the question is not, "Is it true?" but rather, "Does it work for me?" This view of truth is incompatible with the biblical proclamation. If the truth revealed in Scripture is judged by the community's experiences instead of by the author's intention, then it ceases to be biblical truth. Scripture is not true because one believes it. Scripture is true because it is God's Word.

¹Brian McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), xvii; see also Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 72-92.

My analysis of preaching in the emerging church also reveals that revisionist leaders follow the path of postmodern thinkers by relativizing truth. Though these leaders claim to reject a relativistic truth, their methodology demonstrates their relative view of truth. When revisionist leaders employ progressional dialogue, which Pagitt acknowledges as a relativistic approach to interpretation, they demonstrate their relativistic view of truth.² While secular philosophers continue to debate the meaning of truth, biblical preaching must view Scripture as the revealed truth of God that directly corresponds to that which exists in reality.

This dissertation addresses the issue of truth by presenting an understanding of truth that is anchored in the Word of God. After providing a firm, biblical foundation for truth, I present a correspondence view of truth, namely that the truth revealed in God's Word directly corresponds to the reality which he created. I argue that the God who spoke the world into existence created all reality. Moreover, he spoke his Word through the writings of men revealing the same truth that exists in reality. The truth that exists in the world is the same truth spoken by God, embodied in Christ, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture, making it understandable, then illuminates the hearts of men so that they recognize the correspondence between the Word of God and reality.

This study reveals that the revisionists embrace a view of truth that is ever-changing and pluralistic. A careful analysis of their writings and preaching reveals that they embrace a view of truth that at times resembles a view of truth that has qualities of pragmatism and relativism. The works of Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Doug Pagitt, and

²Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 163.

Tim Conder reveal an understanding of truth that fluctuates with the times. Numerous examples were presented to demonstrate the revisionists' redefinition of truth. Their writings demonstrate an approach to Scripture in which the community of faith is seen as an authority equal to Scripture and even a co-creator of truth. Accordingly, if the truth revealed in the original intention of the author does not fit with their experiences and beliefs, it is rejected.

Since truth finds its origin in God, it exists apart from the mind of man and is independent of man's thoughts, ideas, and preferences. If the preacher desires to proclaim the biblical truth of the gospel to postmoderns, he must not redefine the gospel to match the uncertainties of the culture. When the revisionist leaders present a message that is uncertain, they reconstruct the God who speaks, ignore the Son who saves, and silence the Spirit who illuminates.

Another area of weakness of preaching among the revisionist leaders is their displacement of the authority of Scripture. Rather than acknowledge Scripture as the sole authority, revisionists recognize the authorities of the community and church tradition as partners in determining the meaning of the biblical text. While traditional evangelical Christianity has long held the belief in *sola Scriptura*, revisionists approach Scripture with a suspicious scrutiny. They believe that one must take into consideration the life experiences of the community of faith and even place their beliefs and experiences as equal to or greater than the authority of Scripture.

Further, I contend that the authority of Scripture is grounded in the trinitarian foundation of preaching. In the Scriptures, God speaks his Word. The authority of Scripture is nothing less than the authority of God. All Scripture gives testimony of the

God who speaks. The Word of God is recognized as authoritative by the prophets in the Old Testament who preached the Word of God to Israel. Paul and the early church recognize the authority of Scripture and implement it in their teaching, rebuking, exhorting, and training. Jesus also authenticates the authority of Scripture. He demonstrates Scripture is authoritative when he is tempted by Satan. Jesus claims Scripture as his guide for belief and practice. Finally, the authority of Scripture is demonstrated in the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who illuminates the biblical text to bring understanding and knowledge. This illuminating work of the Holy Spirit brings the authority of God's Word to bear on the lives of men, resulting in transformed lives. Through the work of the Trinity, God speaks in his Word, Jesus confirms the authority of God's Word by embodying its truth in his life, death, and resurrection, and the Spirit brings the authority of God's Word to bear on our lives.

I also considered the preaching of the revisionist leaders within the emerging church. The conclusion reached is that their methodologies consistently redefine the truth of God's Word and displace its authority. The revisionist leaders' consistent lack of references to the crucifixion of Jesus, the need for repentance, and atonement is one way in which their redefinition of truth is demonstrated.³ Furthermore, their displacement of

³Numerous revisionist leaders voice their disdain for the idea of penal substitutionary atonement as well as the need for repentance. See 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), 155. Pagitt writes of the "judicial view": "In this view, God is not a softy but rather a hard-nosed, immovable, infallible judge who cannot abide defiance of the law. And boy, did we defy it. When Adam and Eve broke God's law in the garden, they offended and angered God. So heinous was their crime that their punishment extended to all humanity for all time. The antidote to this situation is the crucifixion of the Incarnate Son of God because only the suffering and death of an equally infinite infallible being could ever satisfy the infinite offense of the infinitely dishonored god and assuage his wrath. Yikes!" 154; see also Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 146. Bell here contends that with the coming of Christ now everyone has been forgiven; Burke and Taylor state that all of us are in unless they want to be out. They contend that grace is not conditioned upon acknowledging or repenting of

authority is demonstrated in their unwillingness to acknowledge that there is one single, intended meaning of the biblical author. Instead, the revisionists contend that the reader determines the meaning of the biblical text. An approach to Scripture of this nature not only strips the biblical text of its sole authority, but also contends that the community rather than the Scripture is the source of authority. As the various beliefs and experiences of the community give meaning to the biblical text, they redefine truth to fit their circumstances.

A careful study of the sermons by key revisionist leaders demonstrates that their methodology directly impacts their preaching. Many times the guiding principle in their sermons is a cultural event, media presentation, or social issue rather than the biblical text. Some of the sermons reviewed were simply detailed analyses of movies with little or no focus on the biblical text. which placed the burden for determining meaning in the hands of the community of faith.

Revisionists' sermons lack biblical authority because they replace the intended meaning of the author with a new meaning determined by culture and its influences. Since the postmodern culture rejects authority, the need for repentance and submission to Jesus as Lord does not fit their agenda, and is replaced with an inclusivist message. When this is the motif of the determining authorities, there is no need for repentance because everyone is accepted and simply needs to live their lives in light of that acceptance. While these sermons experience broad acceptance from the postmodern culture, they do not qualify as biblical sermons because they redefine the truth of God's

sin, and it depends on whether or not ones asks for it. One does not have to do something to receive it, nor does one even have to respond to it in some way. It simply comes. See Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 61.

Word and displace its authority.

The revisionists' argument that one cannot reach today's culture without changing the message as well as the methods is simply not valid. Mark Driscoll is an example of one who ministers to postmoderns in an emergent culture while boldly anchoring his message in the sole authority of God's Word and its unchanging truth. He utilizes methods that meet the needs of his environment, yet he emphatically proclaims Christ-centered messages that and confront their hearers with the need to be reconciled to God. In a day when the cultural norm is to question the meaning of life, authority, truth, and the existence of God himself, the preacher cannot afford to deny the truth as revealed in Scripture.

The preacher must approach the biblical text with full confidence in the authority of Scripture. He must acknowledge that Scripture reveals God to man, that it is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice, and that it is sufficient in itself. If he wavers on any of these counts, he veils and muffles the message proclaimed. The revisionist preachers have redefined the truth of God's Word and displaced its authority. As a result, their preaching is empty and vain. Their preaching may entertain and even challenge one to live a moral lifestyle, but it does not sound forth the clear voice of the Living God, making known the gospel of Jesus Christ as illuminated in Scripture by the Holy Spirit. The postmodern culture desperately needs to hear a clear presentation of the truth of God's Word. Unfortunately, the revisionist preachers have determined to join the uncertainty of the postmodern culture, instead of issuing the clarion call for a return to the authority of the Scriptures.

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ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PREACHING
IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

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This dissertation critiques the preaching of revisionist leaders within the emerging church. Chapter 1 analyzes the present state of preaching and delineates the methodology that is utilized in this dissertation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the biblical basis for preaching and the theological foundation upon which preaching stands. This chapter defines biblical preaching.

Chapter 3 examines the emerging church by surveying its origin and noting its characteristics. Specifically, this chapter examines the postmodern influences that affect the emerging church and its approach to preaching.

Chapter 4 defines the nature of truth by providing a solid biblical basis for truth and then presents the correspondence theory as the preferred approach to truth. Specifically, this chapter demonstrates that the truth revealed in Scripture directly corresponds with reality.

Chapter 5 presents the biblical basis for authority. It then examines the issue of authority in the emerging church. Specifically, this chapter examines how the emerging church rejects the sole authority of Scripture in favor of an authority that rests in tradition, community, and Scripture.

Chapter 6 analyzes emerging church preaching by critiquing their methods. This chapter examines the sermons of key revisionist leaders in the emerging church, revealing their faulty methodologies.

Chapter 7 summarizes the previous chapters of this dissertation. It contends that the preaching of the revisionist leaders within the emerging church redefines truth and displaces the authority of Scripture.

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