

AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

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Introduction

As a student of ecclesiology, I have followed with great interest the growing debate generated by what is known as the emerging church, or as it is called by some, emergent. As it is a recent movement, books evaluating it are only now beginning to appear (or emerge), but discussion has been rampant on the Internet.¹ One important evaluation of this movement has been recently given by the eminent evangelical theologian D. A. Carson.² While acknowledging some positive aspects of the emerging church, and recognizing the diversity within the movement, Carson gives a fairly sharp critique of the emerging church, at least as it is represented in the works of Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke, the two individuals Carson sees as most influential in the emerging church in North America and the United Kingdom, respectively.³

Carson's work forms the backdrop for this paper, for it has generated a request from the leaders of the emerging church. In a fascinating document, called "Our Response to Critics of Emergent," they ask for discussion of Carson's critique, and their movement, in the academy. They write,

because most of us write as local church practitioners rather than professional scholars, and because professional scholars who criticize our work may find it hard to be convinced by people outside their guild, we feel it wisest at this juncture to ask those in the academy to respond to their peers about our work. We hope to generate fruitful conversations at several levels, including both the academic and ecclesial realms. If few in the academy come to our defense in the

¹ A recent search under "Emerging Church" on my computer produced 368,982 results. For some of the key books presenting and evaluating the movement, see the references in footnotes throughout this paper.

²D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding A Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 41. A similar evaluation, reflecting similar concerns, was given by David Wells at the 2005 Page Lectures, delivered at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Nov. 9-10, 2005. The lectures may be downloaded from the Southeastern website (www.sebts.edu).

³The two works examined by Carson are Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS/ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) and Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). Of the two individuals, McLaren has been the more prolific and is generally seen as the preeminent emergent leader. Among his other widely influential books are *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) and *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

coming years, then we will have more reason to believe we are mistaken in our thinking and that our critics are correct in their unchallenged analyses.⁴

While I certainly hope that it is not the case that “those in the academy” listen only to fellow scholars, I was encouraged by the honesty and humility reflected in their request. This paper is a response to it.

Defining the Emerging Church Movement

We begin with the difficult task of defining what we mean by the emerging church movement. A recent M.A. thesis on the emerging church states “there is currently no clear, distinct definition or descriptive label for the emerging church,” in part because it is still in fact emerging and developing.⁵ Some of the key leaders wrote recently, “We have repeatedly defined emergent as a conversation and a friendship,”⁶ but such a definition is so general as to be of little help.

Moreover, the movement is so diverse as to open anyone who speaks of it as a whole to the charge of misrepresentation. In fact, the most substantive response to D. A. Carson’s book charges him with just that. David Mills says: “while Carson himself noted the complexity and diversity of the ECM [emerging church movement], he failed to keep these factors in view as he critiqued the movement.”⁷ The leaders of the movement acknowledge that there is neither unanimity nor even a consensus of opinion among them as to what emergent is, and they deny that any single theologian or spokesperson represents the movement as a whole.⁸

Yet despite the diversity of the movement, its still developing nature, and the difficulty of definition, there does seem to be a common premise from which the movement begins and from which an evaluation of the movement may begin. In almost every discussion of the emerging church, the term postmodernism almost immediately appears. For example, in what one student calls “the most common definition of the emerging church,” the phrase is seen as “a label that has been used to refer to a particular subset of Christians who are rethinking Christianity against the backdrop of

⁴ Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, Chris Seay, “Our Response to Critics of Emergent,” found at <http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/official-respon.html>, posted June 2, 2005, accessed August 22, 2005.

⁵ Aaron Flores, “An Exploration of the Emerging Church in the United States: The Missiological Intent and Potential Implications for the Future” (M.A. thesis, Vanguard University, 2005), 7.

⁶ Jones, et al., “Our Response.”

⁷ David Mills, “The Emergent Church—Another Perspective: A Critical Response to D.A. Carson’s Staley Lectures,” 1; available at http://people.cedarville.edu/employee/millsd/mills_staley_response.pdf. The Staley Lectures referred to were the basis for Carson’s book, cited above, n. 2.

⁸ Jones, et al., “Our Response.”

Postmodernism.”⁹ The website for the Emergent Village begins the discussion of the emergent story with the changes happening in the “new postmodern, postcolonial world,” and the way these changes call for new approaches.¹⁰ The Emerging Church website says, “responding to the postmodern mission context is something that churches of *all denominations are called* to do.”¹¹ The phrases “emerging church” and “postmodern church” are widely used as synonymous terms. For example, a soon to be released book by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger is entitled *Emerging Churches*, with the subtitle, *Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*.¹² Carson sees the emerging church as characterized by its protest against modernism and its corresponding conviction that churches must respond to the momentous changes in culture represented by postmodernism.¹³

Emerging church leader Andrew Jones has challenged Carson’s characterization, claiming “We are NOT infatuated by postmodernism, defined by postmodernism, shaped by postmodernism or called to defend it.”¹⁴ Yet even he seems to concede their defining concern by adding, “We do know that a new generation will need to hear the timeless gospel in their own heart language,”¹⁵ and the virtually unanimous consensus in the emerging church is that the new generation to whom they desire to speak must be spoken to in language that is at least cognizant of postmodern sensibilities and sensitivities.

Probably the most important questions to ask of the emerging church deal with the biblical, theological and ecclesiological adequacy of the changes they propose. However, these changes are numerous and vary from individual to individual. Even lists that attempt to characterize the emphases distinctive of emerging churches vary,¹⁶ and

⁹ Flores, “An Exploration of the Emerging Church,” 11; the definition is from Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging_Church, accessed 10/14/2004.

¹⁰ The website is <http://emergentvillage.com/Site/Explore/EmergentStory/index.htm>, accessed 8/19/2005.

¹¹ <http://www.emergingchurch.org/churches-ns4.html>, accessed 10/14/2004. Italics in original.

¹² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). The book is scheduled to be released December 2005.

¹³ Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 41-42.

¹⁴ Andrew Jones, in http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2005/07/emerging_church.html, accessed 8/19/2005. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶For example, Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 137, lists ten characteristics of “successful postmodern churches;” Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 185, gives twelve differences between worship in modern churches and worship in emerging churches; Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the Twenty-first Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), discusses four distinctives under the acronym EPIC (experiential, participatory, image-driven, connected); Jim Wilson, *Future Church: Ministry in a Post-Seeker Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), sees seven “fulcrums” in ministering to those he calls “post-seekers;” Aaron Flores, “An Exploration of the Emerging Church,” 41-42, used twelve criteria

underscore the difficulty of dealing fairly with such diversity. My purpose in this paper is more modest, yet more fundamental. I want to look at what I see as the central premise of the emerging church movement—that churches must change to respond to postmodern culture—and evaluate that premise in terms of its practical accuracy and its theological and ecclesiological adequacy.

The Emerging Church Premise: Must All Churches Respond to Postmodernism?

The first question I want to raise concerning what I see as the central premise of the emerging church concerns simply its accuracy. Is it accurate to say that all churches must respond to postmodernism? Or as emerging church advocates would put it, if churches want to reach the new generation, they must respond to postmodern culture. It is evangelistic passion, especially for the new generation, that has been the catalyst for many in the emerging church. The emerging church website asserts that postmodernism is a real and powerful influence in contemporary culture, and that it is imperative for churches to “learn the vernacular” of the postmodern world, so that they can “speak the gospel within the culture, and minister to postmodern people.”¹⁷ Dan Kimball says his journey from seeker-sensitive to what he calls post-seeker-sensitive began when he realized that non-Christian youth and young adults were not responding to contemporary, seeker services as they had just a few years earlier.¹⁸ As support, Kimball cites the findings of George Barna that young adults ages eighteen to thirty-two are those least likely to describe themselves as committed Christians and that church attendance is declining by generation, with church attendance of teenagers living independent of their parents lower than at any time in the past twenty years.¹⁹ He challenges church leaders to survey their areas and see who isn’t attending church. He believes they will find a “dramatically decreasing percentage of people in emerging generations” involved in local congregations.²⁰ However, there are four factors that seem to question the accuracy of the premise that churches must respond to postmodern culture to reach young people.

in identifying emerging churches; the Wikipedia website, “Emerging Church,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging_Church, accessed 11/24/2004, cites five features of the emerging church. While all these lists do have some common characteristics, there is also a good deal of variety among them in terms of what is seen as distinctive about the emerging church.

¹⁷<http://www.emergingchurch.org/churches~ns4.html>, accessed 10/14/2004.

¹⁸Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 36.

¹⁹Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 48, citing findings by George Barna, “How Americans See Themselves,” *Barna Research Online* (28 May 1998), “Adults Who Attended Church As Children Show Lifelong Effects,” *Barna Research Online* (5 November 2001) and “The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings, from Barna Research Studies,” *Barna Research Online* (17 December 2001), all available at www.barna.org.

²⁰ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 40.

First, as Ed Stetzer helpfully notes, “*the shift to postmodernism has not happened everywhere. . . . There are still large pockets in North America where people live out their lives in much the same manner as their parents before them.*”²¹ In other words, the influences of postmodern culture and thus the need for churches to adapt to postmodern culture may be limited. There still seems to be a place for traditional churches. Leith Anderson makes the following surprising assessment: “Traditional churches will be one of the major growing segments of the twenty-first century.”²² It seems that some young people in some circumstances will still be attracted to and won to faith by some churches that are not intentionally responding to postmodernism.

Second, even in areas that are strongly affected by postmodernism, there are churches that are effectively reaching their communities who are decidedly not part of the emerging church movement. In a recent visit to Washington D.C., I was struck by the fact that the church I was visiting, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, which would call itself a historic church rather than an emerging church, was composed overwhelmingly of those under 30, and located in a city about as deeply influenced by postmodern thought as any in America. It embodied some of the traits Stetzer lists for successful postmodern churches (it is very spiritual, strong on incarnational ministry, service, community, technology and team ministry),²³ but its worship and teaching were not in keeping with that of postmodern or emerging churches. This church is not alone in winning postmodern young people without adopting radical changes. Andy Crouch notes that Manhattan’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church is winning thousands of postmodern young people with Reformed preaching and worship, and churches following its example are thriving on both coasts. He cites Colleen Carroll Campbell’s study of “the new faithful,” young, postmodern Americans who are embracing traditional orthodoxy without postmodern modifications.²⁴ This suggests that there is something more than a new style of worship or alterations in our vocabulary or other changes involved in winning postmodern young people to faith in Christ. What seems to be more important is the gospel, expressed clearly in the preaching of the word and in the lives of those in the church, communicated lovingly and patiently in worship and witness. D.A. Carson sees Redeemer Presbyterian as an example of a church that “*displays all the strengths of the emerging church movement while avoiding most of its weaknesses.*”²⁵ This evidence seems to indicate that while traditional churches may have some lessons to learn from

²¹Stetzer, *Planting New Churches*, 115. Emphasis in original.

²² Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1992), 61.

²³ Stetzer, *Planting New Churches*, 137.

²⁴Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* 48, no. 11 (November 2004): 37-41. The reference is to Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young People Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002). Her study finds a strong return to traditional theology and morality among the post baby-boom generation. Her study deals mainly with Catholic young people, but also includes some evangelical and Orthodox young believers.

²⁵Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 56. Emphasis in original.

emerging churches, a particular response to the postmodern culture does not seem prerequisite for reaching young people.

A third line of evidence questioning the central premise of the emerging church movement is the continuing influence of parents on the spiritual lives of their children. A recent *Newsweek* poll found that 68% of the respondents said that their religion was “The same” or “Mostly the same” as that which they practiced growing up, while only 20% said their practices were “Mostly different” or “Completely different.”²⁶ Moreover, when asked, “How traditional are your religious practices?”, 71% answered “Very traditional” or “Somewhat traditional,” while 19% responded “Not traditional,” and only 6% said, “On the cutting edge.”²⁷ The survey did not separate the responses of the younger generation from the general population, but Christian Smith’s research on teenagers has found that “the vast majority of American adolescents are not spiritual seekers or questers of the type often described by journalists and some scholars, but are instead mostly oriented toward and engaged in conventional religious traditions and communities.”²⁸ He underscores this point in a later description of “the vast majority of American teenagers” as “*exceedingly conventional* in their religious identity and practices.”²⁹ He concludes that his research gives no basis for the idea that teenagers need “some radically new ‘postmodern’ type of program or ministry.”³⁰

A fourth issue that questions the necessity or advisability of responding to postmodern culture is the suspicion on the part of some that the influence of postmodern culture itself is already waning. James Parker sees the demise of postmodernism as all but certain and, following the suggestion of Paul Vitz, he sees the wave of the future as transmodernism.³¹ Millard Erickson has suggested that we are rapidly approaching an era he calls “post-postmodernism,” a term he uses to “highlight the fact that postmodernism is also beginning to be transcended.”³² Even among emerging church leaders, there is some recognition of this danger. Brian McLaren believes that what he calls “absurd postmodernism” and “adolescent postmodernism” are dead or dying, and calls on churches to engage what he calls, not surprisingly, “emerging postmodernism,” and yet

²⁶Jerry Adler, “Where We Stand on Faith,” *Newsweek*, Aug. 29/Sept. 5, 2005, 48. The poll was of 1004 Americans and was conducted in early August, 2005.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Loves of American Teenagers* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 120. Emphasis in original.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 266.

³¹James Parker III, “A Requiem for Postmodernism—Whither Now?” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 307-321. He takes the term “transmodern” from Paul Vitz, “The Future of the University: From Post-modern to Transmodern,” in *Rethinking the Future of the University*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey and Dominic Manganiello (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), 106.

³²Millard J. Erickson, “On Flying in Theological Fog,” in *Reclaiming the Center*, 325.

he acknowledges that the term “is not fully definable and may be decades away from mature definition.”³³

All these factors suggest that the premise that we must respond to postmodernism as a necessary condition for reaching the next generation is problematic at best. Of course, churches should not ignore what is going on in the culture around them and should strive to make their message intelligible. Loving our neighbor as ourselves, being all things to all men, and making the message clear are all biblical imperatives (Rom. 13:9; I Cor. 9:22; Col. 4:4), and require taking cognizance of the worldview of those to whom we speak. But this is simply doing what all believers are always called to do; namely, responding to scriptural commands. To insist that all churches must change their methods and message in the light of postmodern culture to reach the next generation seems simply to be an inaccurate overstatement.

The Emerging Church Premise: Should Churches Respond to Postmodernism?

The prior section questioned the accuracy of the emerging church premise; this section now examines the theological and ecclesiological adequacy of it. To some, the question at the heading of this section may seem needless, because its answer is self-obvious. Of course, churches should respond to postmodernism; they cannot avoid doing so in some way. The last paragraph of the preceding section acknowledged that. But the emerging church poses the question in this fashion: should churches adjust and adapt their methods and their message in the light of postmodern culture?

D. A. Carson compares the emerging church movement with the Protestant Reformation and notes a major difference. The Reformation developed around concerns that the Catholic Church of that time had departed from Scripture in a number of significant ways; thus, the changes advocated by the Reformers were attempts to reform the church on the basis of Scripture. By contrast, the emerging church advocates the changes it does largely on the grounds of changes in the culture, and the corresponding need to adapt to those changes.³⁴ It is true that some in the emerging church, on a number of points, claim to be recovering biblical emphases, and calls to authenticity, community, and a focus on the mission of the church are deeply rooted in the New Testament.³⁵ Moreover, key leaders of the emerging church affirm that they “love, have confidence in, seek to obey, and strive accurately to teach the sacred Scriptures.”³⁶ I see no reason to doubt the sincerity of these leaders, nor the reality of their commitment to Scripture. But in reading their material in books, websites and articles, it is hard to avoid the conclusion

³³This summary of McLaren’s view of postmodernism is taken from Justin Taylor, “An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of the Book,” in *Reclaiming the Center*, 24.

³⁴Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 42.

³⁵These are some of the characteristics that appear most frequently on lists of emerging church distinctives. See the sources listed under n. 16 above.

³⁶Jones, et al., “Our Response to Critics of Emergent.”

that the concern to respond to postmodernism is what is really driving the movement. This means that their understanding and appropriation of postmodern culture is crucial.

In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr gave five classic ways in which the church has related to culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ as the transformer of culture. Of these five models, those in the emerging church could possibly accept any of the five as legitimate responses except for the first, for that model sees the need for the culture to change to conform to Christ, rather than for the church to adjust its methods and message in light of the culture. Yet there are a number of voices in contemporary evangelicalism that have, in effect, advocated this model as the appropriate response to postmodernity.³⁷ Perhaps the most outspoken comment is that by J. P. Moreland in a plenary address to the 2004 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society: “I am . . . convinced that postmodernism is an irresponsible, cowardly abrogation of the duties that constitute a disciple’s calling to be a Christian intellectual and teacher.” He sees postmodernism as “a form of intellectual pacifism,” and describes it as “the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that concedes defeat before the first shot is fired, the ideology that undermines its own claims to allegiance.” It is “an immoral coward’s way out.”³⁸ He thinks postmodern culture should be confronted, shown its errors, and opposed.

Of course, this is not the only assessment. Millard Erickson outlines a number of different evangelical approaches, and he himself distinguishes between what he calls hard postmodernism, which he sees as a threat to Christianity, and soft postmodernism, which he sees as a possibly positive and helpful development.³⁹ This suggests that perhaps one reason for the sharply differing assessments represented by the emerging church and J. P. Moreland may be a different understanding of what postmodernity is.

Most evangelicals who see postmodernism as something to be primarily or exclusively opposed see it primarily in relationship to the issue of truth claims. D.A. Carson says that the “majority view” is that postmodernism’s fundamental issue is epistemology,⁴⁰ and most analyses of postmodern thought do highlight that element. For example, Stanley Grenz, a key thinker for many in the emerging church, agrees with Carson that epistemology is the key issue in postmodernism.⁴¹ In fact, the support for

³⁷For example, Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 23, characterizes David Wells’ approach to postmodern culture with the phrase, “Just Say ‘No.’”

³⁸Moreland’s address is printed in the March 2005 edition of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. See J. P. Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005); 77-88; the quotations above are from 87-88. Moreland specifically sees Brian McLaren as exhibiting some of the confusion he sees as inherent in postmodernism.

³⁹Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 19.

⁴⁰Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 27.

⁴¹Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 185.

this understanding of postmodernism is so widespread and common that it is curious that some in the emerging church question it. David Mills, in a response to Carson, says flatly, “postmodernism is *not* essentially a shift in epistemology,” but involves a wide variety of changes. He says that postmodernism is “not exactly a set of ideas that one can choose for or against. The issue before us is not whether or not *we agree with* postmodernism. That is like asking whether or not we agree with the year 2004.”⁴² For Mills, postmodernism involves transitions that are simply a fact of life. It might seem that the postmodernism that is the concern of the emerging church is not exactly the same thing that the critics of the emerging church have in mind. But Carson notes these idiosyncratic definitions of postmodernity and charges the emerging church with confusing postmodernism and what he calls “*correlatives* of postmodernism.”⁴³ This may seem a mere matter of semantics, but Carson sees the overly broad definition of postmodernism among emerging church advocates as reducing their credibility and making meaningful analysis all but impossible. David Wells likewise critiques the emerging church for a “too facile” distinction between modern and postmodern, ignoring the numerous ways in which modernism continues unabated in contemporary culture and has even become ultra-modern.⁴⁴

It seems that the central problem with the emerging church, one that I think Carson correctly identifies, is that in its zeal to respond to postmodern culture in a way that is evangelistically effective and personally and ecclesialogically refreshing, they have not yet carefully critiqued postmodernism. Without such critique, there is a real danger that the movement will appropriate elements of postmodern thought that cannot be integrated into a genuinely evangelical Christian worldview.

For example, the heart of Carson’s critique of McLaren and the emerging church as a whole is in relation to the truth claims of Christianity. He writes of McLaren, “under the influence of his understanding of postmodernism, McLaren is remarkably averse to trading in the coinage of truth;” later he extends the critique to the movement as a whole: “emergent writers do not handle the truth claims of Christianity very well.”⁴⁵ While McLaren’s recent work, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, has many positive aspects, he is disturbingly vague, cavalier or flippant about questions that are serious and vitally important, such as the ultimate fate of those in other religions.⁴⁶

Emergent leaders, including McLaren, have responded: “we truly believe there is such a thing as truth and truth matters . . . we are not moral or epistemological relativists.”⁴⁷ Thus, they seem to oppose the epistemological relativism that is seen by most as central to postmodernism, yet their opposition to this element of postmodernism

⁴²David Mills, “The Emergent Church,” 5-6. Emphasis in original.

⁴³Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 79. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴Wells, 2005 Page Lectures. See above, n. 2.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 128, 131.

⁴⁶ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 264ff. David Wells comments that the tone of McLaren in this book in responding to evangelical concerns over clarity in his theological positions is at times “mocking.” Wells, 2005 Page Lectures.

⁴⁷Jones, et al., “Our Response to Critics of Emergent.”

is muted, at best. Carson asks, “So where are the substantive warnings about *how* to respond to postmodern errors?”⁴⁸ Of Stanley Grenz, Carson similarly asks: “Grenz says he wants a critical appropriation of postmodernism. What is it within postmodernist epistemology, then, that he will happily criticize and reject?”⁴⁹ Leaders in the emerging church, despite their affirmation of their belief in truth, have not yet critiqued the postmodern skepticism toward the possibility or validity of truth claims.

Their zeal for reaching the postmodern generation, along with their less than rigorous critique of postmodernism, ironically makes them vulnerable to the consumerism they find so distasteful and characteristic of modernity. Kimball recognizes this danger and says, “We must constantly ask the ultimate question, Do the emerging worship gatherings we create produce disciples or consumers?”⁵⁰ Eugene Peterson sees an inherent danger in adapting the message for any specific group: “When you start tailoring the gospel to the culture, whether it’s a youth culture, a generation culture or any other kind of culture, you have taken the guts out of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not the kingdom of this world. It’s a different kingdom.”⁵¹ The research of Aaron Flores seems to show that the emerging church may be in danger of succumbing to this temptation. He writes,

talk of the emerging church in the United States being a stylized approach to postmodern evangelism and church growth (much like the seeker-sensitive movement was for modern evangelism and church growth) is not entirely false. As much as I hate to admit that and have spoken that the emerging church is anything but (in my thesis, blogs, and at **wikipedia**). . . the data in my research might indicate otherwise.⁵²

He adds, “Of the ~200 churches I sampled, I was overwhelmed that many of them seemed to be ‘emerging’ because it was fashionable to be so.”⁵³

To return to the question with which this section began, should churches respond to postmodern culture? Of course they should, in some sense. Love for our neighbors calls us to learn the language and engage the questions of the culture. Should churches adjust their methods and message to postmodern culture? To do so runs the risk of becoming culture driven, rather than Scripture driven. Any adjustments to postmodern culture must be preceded by a biblical analysis of postmodern culture that identifies at

⁴⁸Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 127. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹D. A. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*,” in Erickson, Helseth and Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center*, 46, n. 6.

⁵⁰Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 230.

⁵¹Eugene Peterson, as interviewed by Mark Galli, “Spirituality for all the Wrong Reasons,” *Christianity Today*, 49, no. 3 (March 2005): 42-48.

⁵²Aaron Flores, “Study on the American Emerging Church Released,” on http://thevoiz.typepad.com/weblog/2005/07/study_on_the_am.html, accessed 8/19/2005.

⁵³Ibid.

which points we may take a Christ of culture or a Christ transforming culture position, and at which points we must take a Christ against culture posture. The lack of such analysis is the principal weakness of the emerging church movement, and raises serious questions as to the adequacy of the theological rationale for the numerous specific changes they advocate in the life, practice and ministry of local churches.

Conclusion

What does the future hold for the emerging church? Will it turn out to be a flash in the pan, short lived movement? The number of identifiable emerging churches is still quite small, and the linkage of emerging churches to postmodern culture may give them a dated feel if postmodern culture soon gives way to a coming transmodern or post-postmodern era. But I believe some of the changes introduced by postmodernism will have effects for years to come. For those most deeply and profoundly affected by those changes, emerging churches may provide a helpful ministry, though I do not think there is either empirical evidence or theological reason to believe only emerging churches can reach postmodern young people. And, ironically, the more emerging churches target the postmodern generation, the more they risk becoming what they oppose, a religious reflection of our consumer culture.

The church always faces the twin dangers of cultural captivity and cultural irrelevance. The emerging church charges evangelicalism as a whole with being captive to modern culture and irrelevant to postmodern culture. These charges are not without merit.⁵⁴ However, the emerging church itself also runs the risk of being captive to culture, only to postmodern culture. The more desirable alternative is for all churches to engage the culture, with a zeal to understand its questions and to speak its language, but also with a resolute willingness to take the posture of Christ against culture where biblical fidelity requires it. This challenge of thoughtful engagement with contemporary culture lies before the emerging church and all branches of evangelicalism. May our dialogue here and in the days to come sharpen our response to that challenge.

⁵⁴For example, sociologist Alan Wolfe says of Christianity's relationship to American culture in the past fifty years, "In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture—and American culture has triumphed." Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 3.