

The Emergent Church

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Since it appeared last year, Donald Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan) has been both favorably and unfavorably reviewed - favorably by conservative evangelicals, unfavorably by those "evangelicals" who are part of the Emerging Church movement. This was to be expected. What is this movement? Basically, it is a movement of people who believe the church must use new modes of expressing the gospel as western culture adopts a postmodern mindset.

In his review in the *Christian Examiner*, David Roach observes what many other evangelicals have also observed, about both the movement and the accuracy of Carson's analysis, namely, that the movement's few positive points (it encourages evangelicals to take note of cultural trends and emphasizes authenticity among believers) are far outweighed by its weaknesses (a watered-down or reduced gospel). In his analysis, Carson makes the same point:

At the heart of the "movement" ... lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is "emerging." Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation (Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Zondervan, 2005, 12).

Carson points out the movement arose as a protest against the institutional church, modernism and seeker-sensitive churches. His strongest criticism of the movement is that it is characterized by a reductionistic understanding of modernism and an inappropriate dismissal of confessional Christianity, with many leaders in the movement shying away from asserting that Christianity is true and authoritative. He observes the movement's leaders and pastors frequently fail to use Scripture as the normative standard of truth and instead appeal to tradition.

For example, Carson minces no words late in his book when he criticizes Steve Chalke and Brian McLaren, the most influential leaders in the movement, saying:

Perhaps their [McLaren and Chalke] rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove willing to reconsider their published judgments on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the gospel itself (Carson, 186-187).

Chalke, with the help of Alan Mann, wrote *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003). Chalke is a prominent leader of the Emerging Church movement (hereafter, ECM) on the British side of the Atlantic, whereas McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Baltimore-Washington area. His book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, was also published by Zondervan (2004). Whether one reads McLaren, or hears him in person, he is one of those people who is, as Carson observes, "very hard to dislike" (Carson, 158), and whose experience and learning are readily impressive. For example, John Armstrong of *Reformation and Revival Ministries* writes of McLaren:

It is widely agreed that Brian McLaren ... is one of the most important spokespersons for this new missional trajectory known as emergent. Brian is a talented man. He writes songs, loves art, reads widely (he taught literature), appreciates drama, the Romantic poets, and modern philosophical literature, and speaks with passion and conviction. He is never bombastic, shows consistent evidence of genuine humility in his public and private dialogues, and generally causes a reaction wherever he speaks about modern evangelical Christianity in America.

After meeting Brian McLaren for the first time about eighteen months ago, I began to read his work with much greater personal interest. I have real appreciation for his distinctive apologetic and missional concerns. His words often make me uncomfortable. I like this, once I step back and think a bit more deeply. But I also have concerns about Brian's "manifesto," as expressed in his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (John Armstrong, "Introduction - The Emergent Church: Invention or Innovation?", *Reformation and Revival Journal*, 14:3, 2005, 8).

Many other evangelicals have serious concerns, too. For example, Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, reviewed McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* in his February 16th column, which appeared again on June 20, 2005 (see <http://www.albertmohler.com/>). Mohler began by saying:

The book's title looks both promising and inspiring. Brian D. McLaren's new book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, is sure to get attention, and its title grabs both heart and mind. Who wouldn't want to embrace an orthodoxy of generosity? On the other hand, the title raises an unavoidable question: Just how "generous" can orthodoxy be?

McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church near Baltimore, and he has become a leading figure - if not the single most influential figure - in what is now known as the "Emergent" church. In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he offers what amounts to a manifesto for the Emergent movement, even as he claims to have established a position that combines the strengths of both liberalism and evangelicalism, the charismatic and the contemplative, the mystical and the poetic.

McLaren defines orthodoxy as "straight thinking" or "right opinion." He sets the mood of his book right at the start: "The last thing I want is to get into nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right (meaning approaching or achieving timeless technical perfection)." Still following?

Since he is determined to transcend all those difficult questions of who is right and who is wrong, McLaren wants to qualify his brand of orthodoxy as "generous orthodoxy." He credits the term to Dr. Stanley Grenz, a prominent revisionist evangelical theologian who, in his book *Renewing the Center*, quotes the late Yale theologian Hans Frei as the inventor of the phrase.

McLaren intends to be provocative, explaining that this reflects his "belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity."

McLaren is also honest about the fact that he lacks any formal theological education. As a matter of fact, he seems rather proud of this fact, insinuating that formal theological education is likely to trap persons in a habit of trying to determine right belief.

Then Mohler points out what he believes lies at the heart of McLaren's thinking as well as his writings:

This author's purpose is transparent and consistent. Embracing the worldview of the postmodern age, he embraces relativism at the cost of clarity in matters of truth and intends to redefine Christianity for this new age, largely in terms of an eccentric mixture of elements he would take from virtually every theological position and variant.

He claims to uphold "consistently, unequivocally, and unapologetically" the historic creeds of the church, specifically the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. At the same time, however, he denies that truth should be articulated in propositional form, and thus undercuts his own "unequivocal" affirmation (Albert Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy" - Is it Orthodox?," June 20, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Just how popular is McLaren and his view of the church? He was listed as one of 25 influential evangelicals in the February 7, 2005 edition of *Time* magazine. In its profile, *Time* referred back to a 2004 conference at which McLaren was asked a question related to gay marriage. His response is indicative of his "generosity" when it comes to embracing biblical teaching. He said, "You know what, "the thing that breaks my heart is that there's no way I can answer it without hurting someone on either side." Not surprisingly, *Time* magazine referred to this as "a kinder and gentler brand of religion." In an age of tolerance, we can see in this one statement how one might successfully build a large church. But what kind of church? Mohler observes:

McLaren's "nonanswer" is itself an answer. This is a man who doesn't want to offend anyone on any side of any argument. That's why it's hard to find the orthodoxy in *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Albert Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy" - Is it Orthodox?," June 20, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

In this sense, the ECM appears to follow in step with the seeker sensitive methodology, which it protests.

Brian McLaren admits, "People who try to label me an exclusivist, inclusivist, or universalist on the issue of hell will find here only more reasons for frustration." In short, McLaren simply refuses to answer the question as to whether there will be anyone in hell (universalism). He refers to these kinds of questions as evangelical hang-ups for the doctrinally moribund which, if emphasized and taught, will eventually destroy the church. Again, Mohler observes:

McLaren effectively ransacks the Christian tradition, picking and choosing among theological options without any particular concern for consistency. He rejects the traditional understanding of doctrine as statements of biblical truth and instead presents a variant of postmodernism - effectively arguing that doctrines form a language that is meaningful to Christians, even if not objectively true. He claims to be arguing for "a generous third way beyond the conservative and liberal versions of Christianity so dominant in the Western world."

Incredibly, McLaren simply asserts that concern for the propositional truthfulness of the text is an artifact of the modern age, "modern-Western-moderately-educated desires." As a postmodernist, he considers himself free from any concern for propositional truthfulness, and simply wants the Christian community to embrace a pluriform understanding of truth as a way out of doctrinal conflict and impasse.

What about other belief systems? McLaren suggests that we should embrace the existence of different faiths, "willingly, not begrudgingly." What would this mean? Well, a complete reconsideration of Christian missions, for one thing. McLaren claims to affirm that Christians should give witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. But, before you assume this means an affirmation of Christian missions, consider this statement: "I must add, though, that 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" (Albert Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy" - Is it Orthodox?," June 20, 2005, www.albertmohler.com). In case the reader is, at this point, becoming nauseated with this description of the EMC, the bottom line with Brian McLaren, not unlike Robert Schuller, is that he wants to take anything that has caused argument and might be offensive out of the Christian faith. In the last few paragraphs of his review, Mohler concludes:

The Emergent movement represents a significant challenge to biblical Christianity. Unwilling to affirm that the Bible contains propositional truths that form the framework for Christian belief, this movement argues that we can have Christian symbolism and substance without those thorny questions of truthfulness that have so vexed the modern mind. 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 picture they would want to draw.

When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this movement simply refuses to answer the questions....The problem with A Generous Orthodoxy, as the author must surely recognize, is that this orthodoxy bears virtually no resemblance to orthodoxy as it has been known and affirmed by the church throughout the centuries. Honest Christians know that disagreements over issues of biblical truth are inevitable. But we owe each other at least the honesty of taking a position, arguing for that position from Scripture, and facing the consequences of our theological convictions (Albert Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy" - Is it Orthodox?," June 20, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Again, although reacting against at least part of what they see in seeker-sensitive churches, as was true with the church growth, and then the seeker-sensitive movement, the leaders of the Emergent Church movement argue that those who disagree with them are simply blind to the needs of our post-modern culture and, in this case, the new church that is "emerging." They argue the gospel message needs to be changed so that it is more accommodating and communicable to the emerging generation. If this sounds much like the seeker-sensitive line of thinking, there are some commonalities, but both the leaders in the ECM and its critics point out that there are different ministry philosophies at work. For example, in his column dated June 29, 2005, Albert Mohler, referring to D.A. Carson's book, comments:

From what did the Emerging Church emerge? The modern evangelical movement emerged in the last half of the 20th century complete with "megachurches" and baby-boomer variations. The Emerging Church is defined over against the massive megachurch models and the seeker-sensitive approaches popular among baby-boomer pastors. The formative leaders of the Emerging Church movement argue that they are trying to recover a primitive sense of Christian community that, while keenly aware of contemporary culture and deeply engaged with the culture, avoids the consumerism, entertainment-centeredness, and superficiality of mainstream evangelical churches.

It is significant to note that the vast majority of leaders in the Emerging Church movement seem to have shifted from more conservative forms of evangelical Christianity to the new, more broadly defined Emerging movement. Carson suggests that a detectable sense of protest fuels the movement. Several of the movement's leaders document their own rejection of older forms of evangelical theology and church life. Some have rejected a dispensational eschatology, while others contrast their new understanding of the culture with a previous experience rooted in fundamentalist separatism.

Carson cites the late Mike Yaconelli, who rejected more conservative forms of evangelical Christianity with a sense of intellectual and cultural condescension. Looking back at his earlier faith, Yaconelli commented: "I realized the modern-institutional-denominational church was permeated by values that are contradictory to the Church of Scripture. The very secular humanism the institutional church criticized pervaded the church structure, language, methodology, process, priorities, values, and mission. The 'legitimate' church, the one that had convinced me of my illegitimacy, was becoming the illegitimate church, fully embracing the values of modernity."

Philosophically, the Emerging Church movement represents a repudiation of what it identifies as "modernism." While postmodernism is itself a contested category, the leaders of the Emerging Church movement clearly understand themselves to be affected by, if not fully embracing of postmodernism (Albert Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 1," June 29, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

One of the most important observations made by Carson, Mohler, and others has to do with the ECM's epistemology (the nature and limits of knowledge). Mohler writes:

In particular, Emerging Church leaders focus on epistemology, arguing that modernism corrupted the church by limiting its focus to a defense of propositional truth based in an unassailable philosophical foundation. The rejection of foundationalism is a central theme of emergent culture.

As Carson explains, a majority of Emerging Church leaders and thinkers hold "that the fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is epistemology - i.e., how we know things or think we know things. Modernism is

often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affective - which in turn breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we "know" is shaped by the culture in which we live, controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right" (Albert Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 1," June 29, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Additional characteristics and tenets of the EMC can be briefly listed as follows:

An emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationalities; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion (see Albert Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 1," June 29, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

The need for a far more humble understanding of truth, one that accepts pluralism as a given and holds all truth claims under suspicion. Again, when it comes to homosexuality, McLaren argues that homosexuality as we know it today may not be the behavior or phenomenon condemned in the Bible. In short there is, as Carson observes, an inherently ambiguous understanding of truth (see Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 1," June 29, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

The EMC is not so much a new kind of Christianity in a new movement, but a church movement that is so submerging itself in the culture that it risks hopeless compromise (Carson).

By denying that truth is propositional, Emerging Church theorists avoid and renounce any responsibility to defend many of the doctrines long considered essential to the Christian faith (Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

When Emerging Church leaders point to a massive cultural shift in Western societies, they are not seeing an illusion. As Carson acknowledges, "The Emerging Church movement honestly tries to read the culture in which we find ourselves and to think through the implications of such a reading for our witness, our grasp of theology, our churchmanship, even our self-understanding." Something remarkable has occurred in the culture, and Emerging Church leaders certainly have a point in criticizing mainstream evangelicalism for missing this crucial fact (Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, www.albertmohler.com).

Emerging Church leaders demonstrate an incredible naiveté about the real nature and implications of postmodernism (see Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Emerging Church leaders, influenced by postmodern theory, rightly understand that every individual is deeply embedded in a social location. They are certainly correct in accusing much of mainstream evangelicalism from missing this point entirely - blissfully unaware of how the ambient culture has influenced our own ways of thinking. But does an acknowledgment of the role of social location relativize the meaning of a [biblical] text? (Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Carson acknowledges that many, if not all, of the Emerging Church leaders appear to be driven by a genuine desire to reach persons either unreached or alienated from what they have understood to be the Christian Gospel. Nevertheless, he appears convinced that the Emerging Church movement, as represented by its most influential founders and leaders, has embraced an understanding of Christianity that is inherently unstable, often sub-biblical, and dangerously evasive when it comes to matters of truth (Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

Concerning doctrine, Carson observes that both McLaren and Chalke deny the substitutionary nature of the atonement (Carson).

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

The real question is this: will the future leaders of the Emerging church acknowledge that, while truth is always more than propositional, it is never less? Will they come to affirm that a core of non-negotiable doctrines constitutes a necessary set of boundaries to authentic Christian faith? Will they embrace an understanding of Christianity that reforms the evangelical

movement without denying its virtues? (Mohler, "What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part 2," June 30, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/>).

The ECM's so-called spiritual renewal is nothing like the First and Second Great Awakenings, because those awakenings established Christian truth and biblical orthodoxy, while the EMC is, at best, indifferent to biblical truth, and very often hostile to it (David Wells, professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Page Lectures at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, November 9 and 10, 2005. These lectures may be heard by going to <http://sebts.edu/chapel/chapelMessages.cfm>).

The Emergent church's most distinctive characteristic voice is that it is spiritual, but not religious. The EMC is very superficial in the way it distinguishes modern from postmodern (David Wells, Page Lectures).

The EMC is very close to the postmodern sense of the loss of truth and meaning (David Wells, Page Lectures).

The EMC's mood and attitude is contributing to the shaking of Christian orthodoxy, which is why Christian orthodoxy is fleeing the West (David Wells, Page Lectures).

As has so often been the case in the history of the church, what is essentially heretical is often initially accepted, applauded, and endorsed. This brings to mind the Kentucky Baptist Convention's invitation to Brian McLaren to speak at the Kentucky Evangelism Conference in early 2005 (February 28 - March 1). Those who made the invitation, a year earlier, wanted a dynamic speaker, and they had been impressed with McLaren's insights on reaching people in today's postmodern culture. However, when they read *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and actually came to grasp some of McLaren's real beliefs - particularly his position on salvation - the invitation was hastily withdrawn. As noted above (page 8), McLaren feels Christians should not jump to the conclusion that Jesus is the only way to salvation and, further, one can be a "follower" of Jesus and remain a Hindu or Buddhist. Remember, often what appears to be attractive and desirable is actually evil. Even Satan can pose as an angel of light.