

D A CARSON : RECOMING CONVERSANT WITH THE EMERGING CHURCH

Zondervan 2005

Summary by Alison Morgan December 06

Subtitle is 'understanding a movement and its implications'. It's really a critique of Brian McLaren. Carson argues that the emerging church movement (primarily but not exclusively in the US) is in danger of conforming to the postmodern culture and abandoning the truth claims of the gospel altogether. The book is full of detailed abstract argument, and although what he says is often helpful, there's no *life* in it. He gets unnecessarily bogged down in detail, and his tone is often defensive and scornful.

1. The Emerging church profile

A movement – united by a conviction that changes in culture signal that a new church is 'emerging'. Many more are influenced by the movement than explicitly identify themselves with it. UK Baptists used to encourage believing before belonging; they now encourage belonging before believing. This is a mark of the emerging church movt – though the rubric tends not to be used in the UK.

Characteristics:

1. **Protest.** See Yaconelli's *Stories of emergence*, 2003. Many 'emerging' leaders come from conservative evangelical backgrounds. They start in one place and 'emerge' into another. The protest is against plush organised megachurches with parking lot ministries, creating their own communities separate from those around them. Eg Spencer Burke. Yaconelli: *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 vision. The 'legitimate' church.. was becoming the illegitimate church, fully embracing the values of modernity.* 20 Todd Hunter, ex director Vineyard US, emphasizes the impce of living inside God's story.
2. **Protest against modernism.** The fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is epistemology – how we know things. Postmodernism recognises that much of what we 'know' is shaped by culture. Modernism looks for firm foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist. It focusses not on truth but on relationships. McLaren, the most articulate of the emerging movt, emphasizes feelings over linear thought, experience over truth, inclusion over exclusion, participation over individualism. The words pluralism and relativism recur in his writings – pluralism not as the existence of many differences, but as the stance that no single outlook can explain reality, and relativism meaning that morality and religion are relative to the people who embrace them. We need to learn to live faithfully in a fragmented world (not the same as a pluralist world). A pluralist world is one where lots of games are being played alongside one another. A fragmented world is where people are playing golf with a baseball and baseball with a soccer ball. But McLaren never offers any criticism of postmodernism.
3. **Protesting on 3 fronts.** Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* – accepts pluralism, experiential, mystical, narrative, etc. Modern preaching has the sermon as the focal point, and the preacher dispenses biblical truths to help solve personal problems in modern life; the starting point is the Judaeo-Christian world view. Postmodern preaching is just one element; it emphasizes the experience of who the truth is, and communicates through words, visual arts, silence, testimony, story; the starting point is creation and Eden.

Leonard Sweet, *Post-modern pilgrims* (2000), argues that ministry in C21st has more in common with C1st than with modernism. He warns against embracing a postmodern world view, but argues that mission should be EPIC – experiential, participatory, image-driven, connected.

Points:

- Emerging church must be evaluated as to its reading of contemporary culture
- It stresses fresh questioning of scripture, but can be savagely critical of evangelical handling of scripture [but perhaps these guys have felt constrained by the evangelical conformity culture, which perhaps worked well while it needed to, but the fact it was based on conviction has not equipped it to self-search. Maybe liberalism → evangelicalism → emerging church has been a chain of protest, which has to be right to justify itself].
- Its own proposals for the way forward must be assessed for biblical fidelity

2. Emerging church strengths in reading the times

As the world has shrunk, it has become more diverse. We haven't always grasped how much the culture in which we are embedded shapes our understanding and outlook. Emergents push for authenticity. Candles don't necessarily make it authentic; but it's true that evangelical patterns can just be the norm, right but not joyful. Emergents are right to insist that church should be provocative, making people long for God; and not merely predictable (see G. Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, 2002).

We tend to live as if we Christians remain outside the cultural changes we observe around us. We don't. We too are part of a changing culture, and influenced by it. Postmodernism hermeneutics insists that interpretation of a text is determined by the social location of the readers. But that doesn't mean we can't interpret it non-subjectively – especially if we encourage people of different backgrounds / social contexts to read together, overcoming their hermeneutical blind spots.

Emerging church is strong on evangelism amongst groups not normally touched by the church's witness, the biblically illiterate (as opposed to Christians and those with some Christian background). Not unlike the Jesus People, who did community in a hippy culture and reached many.

Emerging church cuts with many traditional practices; but recovers others, usually from non-evangelical wings of the church – candles, crosses, retreats, silence, drama, liturgical forms.

3. Emerging church analysis of contemporary culture

Emerging church has weaknesses too, esp in its analysis of contemporary culture. For emergents, modern means Enlightenment. It seeks certainty; it's about epistemology. Problems with their analysis:

1. The emergent understanding of modernism is over-reductionistic. It wasn't a blanket rational, cerebral, linear, absolute, objective approach to everything. Kant said the mind imposes order on the data that senses take in. Nietzsche said truth comes in metaphor. There was the Romantic movement. Spurgeon wrote passionately about relationship with God. Many Christian thinkers stressed the importance of truth – because they lived at a time when it was being denied by liberalism, which veered more and more toward the anti-supernatural.
2. Instead of being grateful that the evangelical movement preserved the Christian faith through the modern period, they caricature and mock it. They say such things as humans cannot live by systems and abstractions alone; but we can't live by stories and mystery alone either... We need revealed truths that are to be believed, understood, obeyed – scripture insists this repeatedly. Emergents emphasize the Word as Christ incarnate; and marginalise scripture. It's good to get back in touch with the narrative parts of scripture, not just the didactic parts favoured under modernism. But what are the limitations of postmodernism? Which bits of scripture are overlooked by emerging churches? It's not helpful to condemn previous generations.
3. Emergent theology is shallow; it fails to critique the postmodern worldview. We should not identify ourselves with modernity or postmodernity; nor damn either. Tolerance used to be understood as encouraging those with whom we disagree to express their views; it's now been redefined as the virtue which refuses to disagree with any opinion, however bad or stupid it might be. But you have to disagree before you tolerate.
4. Emergent theology subscribes to the idea that modernism unleashed the great evils of Nazism, communism, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and the solution is postmodernism.

The last few decades have witnessed a substantial shift in Western culture's approach to truth and our perceived ability to know truth. this has been accompanied by a decline in absolutism, an increase in perspectivalism (the view that all claims to truth are finally no more than different perspectives), a decreased confidence in reason and the possibility of knowing any objective reality, and an increased emphasis on other virtues such as relationships, affective responses, and the importance of community and therefore of tradition. 75.

NB he's observed that on many uni campuses, the ratio of Christians from a science/math/computers/business background to those from an fine arts/social science/psychology/literature background varies from 6-1 to 18-1 : probably because the first lot still preserve categories for objective truth... 77

Greg Gilbert, reviewing McLaren : 'I like his chutzpah. But .. I'm also convinced that ministering to postmoderns does not mean diving head-first into their ocean of uncertainty. I don't want to commiserate with them; I want to offer them something different – something like Truth!'

Postmodernism as a topic is beginning to look passé; in Europe few serious thinkers still use the term. Emerging church leaders sometimes sound as if in postmodernity, the age of authentic Christianity has arrived. But many come from conservative church backgrounds separated from the culture, where having a glass of wine and watching the wrong kind of movie was disapproved of.

4. Personal reflections on postmodernism's contribution and challenges

How biblically faithful are the emerging church's proposals for the way ahead? His main criticisms of it lie here. What does postmodernism look like in the N American context?

- Premodern epistemology – based on revelation. Epistemology begins with the existence of God.
- Modern epistemology – begins with Descartes, a Christian who wanted to find common ground for talking about truth with atheists. 6 characteristics: It begins not with God but with 'I'. It looks for a definite foundation for knowledge. It adopts a rigorous method. It assumes that epistemological certainty is desirable and attainable. It believes that what is true is universally true. It is mostly naturalistic not theistic, and assumes that matter, energy space and time are all that is – ie it postulates a closed universe.
- Postmodern epistemology – throws over all 6 characteristics of modernity. It still begins with 'I', but each 'I' is different. It is suspicious of any foundation; none is secure, only culturally determined. It sees many methods, producing many results none of which is more true than others. It insists that objective knowledge is neither attainable nor desirable. Truth cannot be universal; truth is true for some people. It's no longer exclusively materialist in its view of reality.

Postmodernity thus becomes syncretistic, secularist, biblically illiterate, spiritually ill-defined, and globalised.

Consequences in our society:

- Notions of objective morality are questioned
- Evangelism is repudiated, as it gives the impression that Christians think they have something superior
- People will respond to more than argument – feeling, relationships, aesthetics, mysticism, etc influence belief
- Postmoderns like personal narrative – people telling their own story
- Science is undermined, seen in part at least as a social construction.

Strengths of postmodern epistemology:

- It exposes the weakness of many strands of modernism
- It is open to thinking about nonlinear factors in human knowing; it releases the imagination
- It is sensitive to the diversity of cultures in the world
- It demands we recognise the implications of finitude in all human knowing

Weaknesses of postmodern epistemology:

- It sets up a false antithesis – as we can't know things absolutely, it follows we can't know them at all
- It thus fails to acknowledge that effective knowing and communication can take place, particularly since we have a God who came to earth precisely in order to help us to know things we could not otherwise know with certainty... It also limits science. Thomas Kuhn argued that scientists don't just add fact to fact, they come up with a new paradigm, a new model that views the world in a different way, and then test it out. The new paradigm then shapes the world of the scientists who operate within it; it becomes their belief system. 107. eg after WW1 German scientists developed the nondeterministic theory of quantum mechanics; it restored their social status. But it's still true that new data often provoke a new theory, which is then adopted because it provides a better explanation of the way things are.
- It is weak on moral issues. Postmodern approaches to ethical matters become justification for each individual's personal pursuit of immediate pleasure.

3 models of human knowing:

1. A person's worldview can be likened to their horizon. No 2 people have the same horizon. But we can by effort get inside each other's – our own does not have to limit our understanding absolutely. This is what we do when we look at context in studying the Bible.
2. The hermeneutical spiral. Knowledge is more like a spiral than a circle.
3. The asymptotic approach (Popper). An asymptote is a curved line that gets closer and closer to a straight line without ever touching it. Our knowledge can get closer to reality, even without owning it.

Reflections:

- We can preserve a place for truth even while recognising we cannot know things absolutely.
- Postmodernity, like modernity, is methodologically atheistic – it doesn't start with God. This limits us...

5. Emerging church critique of postmodernism

'Emerging writers and preachers are so busy telling us how culture has changed that their response has offered very little critique of the changes. It vehemently denounces modernism, but offers nothing very penetrating when it comes to postmodernism.' It has failed to deal with the importance of truth claims. McLaren seems to assume that postmodernism has brought such an irreversible shift in people's thought patterns that the church is faced with a fundamental choice: adapt to postmodernism, or become irrelevant. He advocates (*The Church on the Other side*) 12 strategies:

1. maximise discontinuity – make big changes, not just little ones
2. redefine mission – by living in missional communities
3. practice systems thinking – the church is more organic than linear
4. trade your traditions for tradition – embrace the whole Christian tradition as your own
5. resurrect theology as art and science
6. design a new apologetic
7. learn a new rhetoric – learn how to communicate with people in today's culture
8. abandon structures as they are outgrown
9. save the leaders
10. subsume missions in mission
11. look ahead
12. enter the postmodern world

These contain some good advice; but don't tell us how to refute the absurd in postmodernism. McLaren advocates doing theology as servants of mystery – but that doesn't mean that just because we can't be cut and dried about things, we have to give up altogether. Emergent writers do not handle the truth claims of Christianity very well, either per se or in relation to other religions. McLaren offers no response to the way the early church had to find its way in a world of competing religious voices, all of which accused Christianity of arrogance in claiming there is only one way of salvation; and he ducks the issue of other religions altogether, confining himself effectively to saying nice things about them, however apparently evil they may seem. Not St Paul's approach.. McLaren and others also fail to affirm the unique role of Scripture; is it given the status we give it merely because most of us acknowledge its authority, or is it because it actually *has* some authority as revealed by God? And while it's good to talk about belonging before believing, we have to recognise that Christians are meant to constitute a new and distinctive community, not just an inclusive gathering of whoever. The early Christians tied together religion and ethics in a distinctive way; but they also emphasized belief and truth in a distinctive way. They were regarded as unique in that Christianity seemed more a philosophy than a traditional religion, when set alongside classical paganism. Finally, emergents fail to handle facts in a responsible way

An anon Scottish preacher:

You say I am not with it?
My friend, I do not doubt it.
But when I see what I'm not with
I'd rather be without it.

6. Emerging church weakness illustrated in 2 significant books

1. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan 2004

He identifies 7 Jesuses, from 7 church traditions, and explains why he is a *missional evangelical post/protestant liberal/conservative mystical/poetic biblical charismatic/contemplative fundamentalist/calvinist anabaptist/anglican methodist catholic green incarnational depressed-yet-hopeful emergent unfinished Christian*. But he just pulls out threads he likes from each of his 7 traditions; none would recognise what he pulls as being descriptive of their tradition as a whole. Carson goes through them each in turn. Long discussion of the theory of the atonement, McLaren offering willingness to suffer, Carson defending substitution.

2. Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Zondervan 2003

Chalke concentrates on 'God is love', at expense of holiness and sin. He, like McLaren, regards substitutionary atonement as 'a form of cosmic child abuse'.

7. Some biblical passages to help us in our evaluation

Lists of relevant texts on truth, knowledge and pluralism.

Refs to idolatry, p 201. Bible includes covetousness as idolatry – Col 3.5.

It's possible to be biblically unfaithful by being narrower than scripture; also by being broader than scripture. We are called to biblical fidelity.

GK Chesterton: *what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong pace. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition.. and settled on the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.*

8. A biblical meditation on truth and experience

'A good deal of the discussion in this book could be recast as a debate between the claims of truth and the claims of experience'. For emergents, trad evangelicalism appears inflexible because it thinks in truth categories and does not perceive the legitimate place of experience. But from the perspective of the trad Christian, emergents may appear so committed to new experiences that the truth can be easily left behind. 2 Peter 1 suggests we need both. Our confidence in the truth relies on constant review (1.12-15), depends on historical witness (1.16-18), is grounded in biblical revelation (1.19-21).

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