

Absolutely Not!
Exposing the Postmodern Errors of the Emerging Church
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I've been assigned the *impossible* task of explaining and critiquing the emerging church movement in one 75-minute session. It will save some time if I start by being totally candid with you.

I don't suppose anyone who knows me expects me to be very positive about the emerging church movement. I'd love to stand up here and spend the first half-hour or so listing features of the emerging church that I think are admirable. I actually do think there *are* a few valid and important points being made by people in the movement, and I'll get to them, but I'd rather not *start* there, if you don't mind.

(By the way, I realize it would be very stylish if I took the other approach. If I gave you an ambiguous review and a totally dispassionate analysis, so that when I finished you couldn't actually be sure whether I think the emerging movement is a good thing or not, that would fit perfectly with the postmodern paradigm favored by emergent types. And I'm sure a lot of them would congratulate me for it. But that would not reflect my own honest perspective, and I'd prefer just to be totally frank with you. So that's what I'm going to do.)

My goal in this hour is *not* to persuade people who are already sold on the emergent idea that it's a *bad* idea. My aim is to help conservative pastors of established churches who are committed to *biblical* principles by making you aware of some of the things that are going on in the so-called emerging church movement. And I hope to explain why I believe it is worth the struggle to resist these trends. Because you *will* invariably be confronted with pressure to embrace some of the philosophy and style of the emergent movement in your own ministries. And judging from what I know of church history—especially *recent* church history—it will be a difficult struggle for some pastors to resist.

ABOUT THE NOMENCLATURE...

Before I start to describe the emerging church movement and outline some of its main characteristics, I want to mention that there's been quite a lot of debate about what name we ought to use when we speak of this movement. For the sake of this seminar, I'm pretty much just going to refer to it as "the emerging church movement," in keeping with popular usage. I couldn't think of anything else to call it without inventing some circumlocution that would only confuse matters. So I'll refer to it as the "emerging church movement," but I want to add a long disclaimer here to acknowledge that none of those three words very well fits the thing we are describing.

Emerging. In the first place, I object to the implications of the word *emerging*. This movement is not some beautiful new butterfly coming out of a cocoon. Although people in this movement sometimes *claim* to represent the next great step forward after the failure of modernism, my assessment would be that what we are really seeing here is the collective dying gasp of every major modernist idea evangelicals and fundamentalists have stood against for the past century and a half.

Virtually all the literature, style, and philosophy associated with the emerging subculture are shot through with conspicuous elements of worldliness, man-centered worship, the narcissism of youth, liberal and neo-orthodox theology, and the silly, ages-old campaign to be “contemporary” at all costs.

And I hope you realize that very few of this movement’s most obvious features are *truly* inventive. The philosophy and even some of the novelties of style are really not *that* much different from what was happening during my junior high school years in the youth group of the liberal Methodist church I grew up in. We had the candles and contemporary music and every kind of religious paraphernalia you can imagine—but *not the gospel*. Methodist church leaders, who had abandoned the gospel years before, desperately sought a way to make the church seem “relevant” to a younger generation in its own language. There has *always* been some segment of the church or another that is desperate to keep up with the shifting fads of culture and is looking for novel ways to adapt Christianity to the spirit of the age. That has been true at least since Victorian times. Spurgeon wrote against it.

Although that philosophy been tried repeatedly in various forms, it has *never* genuinely contributed anything to the growth or effectiveness of the church. If the pattern of history holds true, my prediction is that the emerging church movement will be *dead* and *irrelevant* even before the current generation gives way to the next generation. That’s what inevitably happens to movements that are tailored to the tastes of a specific generation. At most, they have about a 15- or 25-year lifespan. So in my judgment, the term *emerging* will almost certainly prove to be a major misnomer in the long term—and quite possibly even in the short term.

Church. Second, questions have also been raised from within the movement itself about whether it’s really appropriate to speak of “the emerging *church*.” Brian McLaren is without question the leading American figure and most prolific writer in the movement. He said last summer that he now prefers to speak of the emerging “conversation.”

That would actually be fine with me because in some ways the movement isn’t very *churchlike* in its attitude toward structure and authority. (I’m tempted to propose nomenclature of my own: “the emerging free-for-all” because that actually seems to fit what is happening in the movement even better than the idea of a “conversation.”) But I think it’s worth noting that the best-known spokesperson in this movement has indicated that even he thinks the word *church* really doesn’t fit the movement very well.

Movement. That’s not all. In some important ways the emerging subculture is not really even a *movement* in the classic sense. There are no clear leaders or universally recognized spokespersons who would be affirmed by everyone associated with the emerging church. The closest to a dominant figure would be Brian McLaren, and he is so controversial and so prone to making disturbing statements that many who have adopted the emerging style or otherwise identified with the emergent movement say they don’t want their ministries or opinions to be evaluated by what *he* says. And I don’t blame them.

On top of that, this is a movement that *hates* formal structure, so it has been resistant to any kind of definition or careful boundaries that would make its shape easy to discern or describe. It’s a movement that is purposely foggy and amorphous, fluid and diverse—and most in the movement want to keep it that way.

That ambiguity is a major aspect of the emerging subculture’s love affair with all things postmodern. The lack of clarity and the absence of any clear consensus in the movement is also the main strategy for self-defense against critics. No matter what you criticize within the movement, practically the first response you are going to hear is that “not everyone in the

movement holds that opinion.” And in most cases, that’s probably true. It’s a movement that loves ambiguity and diversity and despises clarity and organization.

Nonetheless, last year Brian McLaren and a few other leading emergent figures banded together to form an actual organization called simply “Emergent”—also known as “Emergent Village” or (as you find it on their website) “Emergent-U.S.” So the terminology becomes even more difficult.

Emergent—the organization—is actually different from the “emerging church movement.” Until last summer, you could use the word *emergent* as a kind of shorthand term to signify the phenomenon itself, but now that’s the name of an actual organization. And at times there even seems to be a bit of tension between Emergent, the organization, and the “emerging church movement.”

According to a June 8 news release from the organization, Tony Jones was appointed “National Director” of Emergent. Others within *the emerging church movement* practically saw that as a betrayal of the spirit of what they stand for. So a week later, the organization issued an update on their weblog in the form of a memo to the rest of the emerging church movement. The memo said this:

Some of you read the last post regarding the recent appointment of Tony Jones as “National Director.” Before the official press release was sent out the decision was made to instead use the title “National Coordinator.” This felt more in keeping with both the spirit of Emergent and the overall purpose of the role.

Here you begin to see why “the emerging church movement” is next-to-impossible to define. But I hope you can also begin to get a flavor for what makes the so-called “emerging church” different from the historic churches of the past. What we have here is a large and growing subculture on the fringe of the evangelical movement that has been profoundly influenced by postmodern ways of thinking, discourse, and attitudes.

I dealt with postmodernism in a seminar here at the Shepherds’ Conference last year and the year before, so I don’t want to cover the same ground again. If you feel you are totally in the dark about postmodernism and what it looks like, you can get a CD of that message or download the transcript of it from the Internet. I’m pretty sure it’s freely available somewhere online.

It includes a partial critique of one of Brian McLaren’s books, *A New Kind of Christian*, because that book is essentially a plea for Christians to embrace postmodernism and adapt to the postmodern way of thinking—not to fear and resist it. We need to conform our perspective and our style of discourse to the postmodern fashion, McLaren says, in order to reach a postmodern generation.

That is, I believe, the central idea that drives the emerging church movement—although many in the movement might balk at the label *postmodern*, and (in all fairness) many people in the movement would also want to add several paragraphs of qualifications and clarifications to make it clear that their own assessment of postmodernism would not necessarily be completely positive.

But there’s no question that the movement is self-consciously and purposefully trying to accommodate or adapt to or otherwise indulge the postmodern climate of the age we live in. And that is *why* some of the essential features of *faith* and *assurance* that you and I might think are absolutely essential to communicating the gospel clearly and in a strong, biblical way are sometimes actually held in *contempt* by people in the emerging subculture. I’m speaking of

features such as authority, strong convictions, doctrinal precision, clear definitions, and candor. All of those things run counter to the values prized by postmodernists.

So, naturally, one of Tony Jones's first duties as "coordinator" for the Emergent organization was to write a long weblog entry explaining why the group found it necessary to *have* a "coordinator" and a board of "directors" and an actual staff and organization and a real, tangible hierarchy.

It honestly did not surprise me that he would feel obliged to write such a justification for the organization's existence (or that many in the movement were *demanding* that kind of explanation) because, for the most part, the emerging church movement (like the postmodern culture it imitates) is highly suspicious of (or even contemptuous of) things like organizational charts, structured definition, or even the idea of authority itself. Obviously, all those things are necessary in any kind of formal organization. But if you understand postmodernism, it makes perfect sense that postmodernists would nevertheless resist the clarity and authority that comes with any kind of formal organization.

All that is to say that the word *movement* is also not quite right, and even most insiders don't like the implications of the word *movement*. But for lack of better terminology, I'm going to continue to refer to the "emerging church movement," and I hope that for clarity's sake and for time's sake you will indulge me in that shorthand usage of three terms that really don't quite fit. (If it's a comfort to anyone *in* the movement, every time the expression "emerging church movement" appears in the notes I am using, I have put it in quotation marks.)

I have to say, by the way, that one of the really fun things about watching the "emerging church movement" is keeping a score card of how quickly every discussion melts down into a dispute about words and terminology. Many in the movement are recent college graduates who learned the postmodernist technique of *deconstruction* as their primary method of interpreting language and ideas. That's what postmodernist lit teachers have been teaching for 15 years or so now. Emergent types have learned the technique well, and they use it to good effect.

DEFINITION

So with that as background, let me attempt to give you something that approximates a definition of this movement—this *thing*—that we all agree resists any kind of precise definition.

Some important disclaimers. I hope you won't be surprised or dismayed when people who are devoted to the emergent subculture point out that my description of their movement is an oversimplification. They are also going to complain that some of the things I criticize don't apply in every exhaustive detail to every person or every congregation in their movement.

Remember: I know that, and I have already acknowledged it. But I *still* think there is great value in giving you a description of the broad contours of the movement, and that is what I am going to try to do.

Some in the movement will complain that I haven't read enough of their literature, I haven't interacted enough with the right emergent bloggers, or I haven't visited enough of their gatherings to be a competent critic of their ideas.

All I can say in response is that I have read as much literature from the movement's key writers as I can get my hands on; I have interacted directly with people in the emerging movement as much as my time and schedule will permit; I *have* already put many of my criticisms of the movement in the public arena repeatedly; and I have invited (and received) lots of feedback from people who are devoted to the movement. I have done my best to be fair and complete. And I assure you that I will continue to study the movement.

But I don't agree with the notion that in order to be a reasonable and credible analyst of a movement like this, you have to remain neutral indefinitely and never become a critic. There is simply too much in the movement that warrants criticism.

As I said, I just want to be candid and clear for you. I wish time allowed me to be as nuanced as I normally would like to be. On the other hand, I think a tendency to over-nuance and over-qualify everything has already spoiled some otherwise potentially helpful critiques of this movement.

A definition (of sorts) in four parts. So allow me to give you a broad-brushed description of the “emerging church movement,” mainly for the benefit of those who are still having a hard time getting their minds around the concept of what this thing is. This won't be the kind of pithy definition you can take down in a single sentence, so don't even bother trying. But I will try to keep it brief enough to be manageable.

So here's my definition:

1. The “emerging church” is a convenient name for a broad-based and growing assortment of similar or related movements that have flourished in the past half-decade—mostly on the fringe of the evangelical movement. “Emerging” congregations in one way or another tend to be keenly attuned to the postmodern shift in art, literature, and public discourse.

(Incidentally, *postmodernism* itself is not easy to define, but in general it refers to a tendency to discount values like dogmatism; authority; absolutism; assurance; certainty; and large, commanding, exclusive worldviews—which postmodernists like to label *metanarratives*. Postmodern values would include things like diversity, inclusiveness, relativism, subjectivity, tolerance, ambiguity, pragmatism, and above all, a view of “humility” that is characterized by lots of qualms, reservations, uncertainties, and disclaimers about whether anything we hold in our belief system is really true or not. Those are the very same values that are usually held in high esteem in the “emerging church movement.”)

By the way, I think it's a mistake to see the emerging subculture as nothing more than the next generation's version of the “seeker sensitive” church. It is that, but only in a certain sense. In some ways, the “emerging church” is a reaction against and a departure from the shallow, mass-movement, professional showmanship of the slick megachurches like Willow Creek and Saddleback. Emergent types tend to value authenticity over professionalism. Many of their churches—perhaps a *majority* of their churches—are home churches or otherwise small-group gatherings that are informal and unorganized almost to an extreme.

Understand: this is a very diverse movement. Some in the movement might even say they are *wary* of postmodern influences, while others are advocating that Christians ought to *embrace* postmodernism enthusiastically. But, either way, they would all pretty much be keenly aware that postmodernism has molded the way contemporary people *think*, the way *public discourse* is carried on, the way *public opinion* is shaped, and the way judgments are usually made about truth claims. Therefore, they argue, the church *must* adjust its message accordingly. And normally, in practice, this means some level of accommodation to postmodern preferences.

2. Now, here is another vital aspect of what distinguishes the “emerging church movement”: Most congregations in the movement would describe themselves as *missional*, by which they mean that they stress the importance of evangelistic outreach by involving themselves in the lives of unbelievers in the community outside the narrow circle of the church. They point out that the way believers *live* is one of the most potent and persuasive aspects of our testimony to unbelievers—if not the single most important thing of all.

There's nothing essentially wrong with that idea, of course, as long as we *also* communicate the truth of the gospel clearly and distinctly with words. The problem arises when you factor in the postmodern tendency to distrust or despise every kind of clarity, certainty, or authoritative truth-claim. It has often meant, in practice, that the emphasis on "missional living" results in an evangelistic strategy in which gospel preaching is downplayed or deliberately omitted (and I'll probably have more to say about that if time permits).

3. Here's another (similar) feature of the "emerging church movement": Emergent-style churches show a preference for "narrative theology" as opposed to systematic doctrine. The *story* of the gospel is ultimately more important than the *theology* of it. The simple narrative of salvation history must not get lost in the careful parsing of theological words and ideas.

Obviously, there's an important germ of truth in that idea, too. The four gospels *do* tell us about the life of Christ in narrative format. They are collections of anecdotes and incidents from His life, not systematic doctrinal treatises about soteriology, hamartiology, or any of the other -ologies by which we tend to categorize our theology.

People in the "emerging church movement" place a lot of stress on that fact, and in my assessment, they tend to quickly go overboard. The fact that so much of Scripture is narrative doesn't alter the fact that much of it is *also* didactic—and vice versa. Here, I think their obsession with postmodernism has got the better of some of our emergent friends, and they have simply reacted against rationalism by running to the opposite imbalance.

4. In this same vein, people in the "emerging church movement" often don't hold the idea of propositional truth in very high regard. And this one of the key points many of them want to make: A *proposition*, by definition, is a premise that is either true or false. There is no third choice. (That is one of the most basic laws of logic, known as the law of the excluded middle.)

Postmodernists simply don't like handling ideas with that kind of clarity. So there's a tendency among emergent types to denigrate or devalue the very idea of propositional truth, logic, and rationality.

I contend that you cannot teach truth at all apart from propositions of some sort. Boil any truth-claim down to its pure essence, and what you have *is* a proposition. You cannot even tell stories without propositions, so if you were serious about dispensing with propositions altogether, you would have to forfeit narrative theology, too.

Now again, I think there is a germ of truth underlying this aspect of postmodernist thinking. Truth is more than *merely* a collection of propositional statements. Most of us understand that there is a vast and important difference between knowing Christ and knowing facts about Christ.

On the other hand, knowing Christ in a true and saving way must necessarily involve knowing true facts *about* Him. You don't really know Him at all in any biblical sense if you don't know the basic facts about His deity, His death, His resurrection, and other essential parts of the story. So there is a sense in which the propositional aspect of the truth about Christ is vital. Al Mohler says it this way: "While truth is always more than propositional, it is never less."

By the way, the suggestion that we try to deal with truth in non-propositional form is not anything new with the "emerging church movement." It's an idea that was floated as one of the key tenets of neo-orthodoxy at least 65 years ago or more.

I would argue that the assault on propositional truth ultimately entails the abandonment of logic completely. It is an irrational idea. Francis Schaeffer said the same thing. He regarded neo-orthodoxy's attack on propositional truth as the theological equivalent of suicide. He said that when we abandon rationality in that way, we have crossed "the line of despair." We might as well

abandon the quest for truth itself. And in effect, that is the result of the postmodernist perspective.

5. Here's a final element in my abbreviated description of the emerging Christian subculture: Most insiders like to portray their movement as an answer to the influence of *philosophical modernism*; a departure from modernism; something wholly distinct from modernism. As you know, modernism has assaulted the church for some 150 years, at least. It has always, consistently been hostile to evangelical truth.

Some actually believe the "emerging church movement" is *so much the polar opposite of modernism* that when you criticize their movement, they will accuse you of blithely and unthinkingly buying into the errors of "modern" thinking. They will often label you a "modernist." And among other things, they will accuse you of parroting a brand of philosophical foundationalism that owes more to Rene Descartes and Cartesian foundationalism than it owes to the Scriptures. Lots of naïve people have been drawn into the movement by sophisticated-sounding philosophical arguments like those.

That claim is based on the assumption that *postmodernism* itself represents a *correction* of the philosophical errors of modernism, rather than *just a further step in a wrong direction*.

How any Christian can uncritically adopt that view of carnal, worldly, humanistic philosophy is an utter mystery to me. It ought to be obvious to people in the church that postmodernism poses at least as much a threat to the truth and the clarity of the gospel as every other humanistic philosophy that has preceded it in the long parade of human foolishness that has brought us to the postmodern moment in which we are living.

Postmodernism is just the latest, and possibly the *worst*, in a relentless procession of bad ideas that *ought* to have conditioned the church to despise and distrust the folly of human wisdom (which, by the way, is what Scripture *commands* us to do).

Modernism at its very core and inception was an overt attempt to subvert and defeat the truth of Scripture with humanistic rationalism. Modernism failed, and failed miserably.

Postmodernism is not really a significant departure from modernism; it is just a similar attempt to subvert and defeat the truth of Scripture by glorifying *irrationality*, and by portraying *all* truth as hopelessly paradoxical, ambiguous, unclear, uncertain, unimportant, or otherwise unworthy of all the concern and attention philosophers have given to the idea. Postmodernism abandons the hope of finding any absolute or incontrovertible truth, and instead, the postmodernist looks for amusement by playing with words and language, and by questioning every assumption and challenging every truth-claim.

That's no answer to modernism; it is a further step in the same wrong direction.

So my assessment of the "emerging church movement" is that far from being the antithesis of modernism, this sort of "evangelical *postmodernism*" is really ultimately nothing more than Modernism 2.0.

I have been trying to highlight that point for the past six months or more on my blog by posting excerpt after excerpt from Charles Spurgeon's criticisms of 19th-century modernism. (All that material is still online if you want to review it. Just do a Google search for three words: *Spurgeon*, *modern*, and *postmodern*. That will be enough to get you started.) It is very eye-opening to see that every one of the arguments and biblical points Spurgeon made against the so-called "evangelical modernists" of his day can (without any modification whatsoever) be applied against the "evangelical postmodernists" of our day.

Far from being antithetical, the two movements are ultimately just one and the same. The "emerging church movement" is this generation's version of what our grandparents knew as

modernism—updated in some ways, but ultimately, it’s essentially the same. Postmodernists today are using the same arguments and the same strategies that the modernists of the Victorian era employed. The results will be exactly the same, too.

You can begin to understand, I hope, why I insist that this topic demands to be dealt with the utmost candor and clarity, rather than with evasions and equivocations. And I make no apology for that.

THE “MOVEMENT” IS NOT MONOLITHIC

Before we move on, I want to reemphasize something important and elaborate on it just a bit: What I just gave you was a quick, broad-brush description of the “emerging church movement.” There are lots of nuances and differences within the movement. *Not everyone in the movement is saying exactly the same thing.*

I already indicated, for example, that attitudes toward postmodernism vary within in the movement. Practically everyone in the movement will insist that they do not uncritically embrace every aspect of postmodernism, and that they are only trying to adapt their language and worship style in order to reach postmodern people. Listen to what emergent leaders say about postmodernism, for example, and you will see that they don’t all agree among themselves completely about what’s good and what’s dangerous about postmodernism. Even Brian McLaren, who used to speak of postmodernism in glowing terms, lately seems to be trying to avoid references to the subject and now occasionally even denies that he himself is a full-on postmodernist.

So there are vast differences in style and opinion within the “emerging church movement”; the movement itself is in flux, and I want to acknowledge that.

For example, the British flavor of evangelical postmodernism tends to be somewhat less superficial than its American cousin. British emergents are normally more concerned about substance as opposed to style. They would tend to stress the *missional* aspects of the movement and see their philosophical and doctrinal differences with mainstream evangelicalism as secondary. One of the outstanding British figures in the “emerging church movement,” Andrew Jones, recently wrote an appeal to American emergents, urging them to get their act together.

I’m not suggesting that the “emerging church movement” in Britain is ultimately any more doctrinally sound or any less postmodern than the American version. It’s not. But it is, perhaps, a little more serious.

Then you have Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill in Seattle, who at this time last year might have been singled out as the quintessential “emerging church” leader. But last spring he wrote a letter to other pastors in his branch of the movement and said, “Let me agree that much of the church today is incredibly frustrating. Personally, when I hear so many young guys denying substitutionary atonement and the like after drinking from the emerging church toilet I turn green and my clothes don’t fit.”

Since then, Driscoll has spoken out several more times against the doctrinal ambiguity of the “emerging church movement,” and it is clear that he rejects the movement’s hostile attitude toward doctrine and propositional truth. Driscoll even appears to have stopped referring to himself as “emergent,” and he and the movement currently seem to have something of a love/hate relationship going.

Assuming Mark Driscoll *is* still (more or less) part of the movement, he would definitely represent the “conservative” wing. (He has recently published tributes at his blog to Robert

Schuller and Bono, the rock musician, so the word *conservative* would apply to him only in a relative sense.)

That reminds me of a couple of other things I wanted to mention but can't really take time to elaborate on. This may help you more than anything I have said so far to understand the flavor of the "emerging church movement": Bono—the Irish rocker and politico of U2 fame—seems to be the unofficial icon of the movement. If you've been tuned into pop-culture at any time over the past two decades and know anything about Bono, that might help you to grasp something about the look and feel of the movement. (My favorite fact about Bono is that he named one of his sons "Elijah Bob Patricus Guggi-Q.")

Anyway, emergent types seem to *quote* Bono all the time. I *would* say that he sometimes seems to be the chief theologian of the "emerging church movement," but in all fairness, that honor belongs more to John R. Franke and Stan Grenz. Grenz, sadly, died at a fairly young age about a year ago when an aneurism burst in his brain. But he and Franke are the two academic theologians who have done more than anyone else to blend postmodernism and theology into a kind of quasi-evangelical doctrine.

Again, I can't elaborate on this at length in our short time frame, and I don't want to take anything away from the scholarship and writing style of either John Franke or Stan Grenz, because intellectually, both of them were blessed with more brilliant minds than mine. But I am disturbed by the accommodations both men made to postmodernism, and I think the fruit of their work is manifestly disastrous.

However, if you want to begin to understand how anyone might try to write a theological justification for the irrational agglomeration of unorthodox ideas that is circulating in the "emerging church movement", read the book these two men jointly authored, titled *Beyond Foundationalism*, subtitled "Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context," published by Westminster John Knox Press just five years ago.

BECOMING COGNIZANT OF EMERGENT

Now, if you men represent a typical cross-section of conservative evangelical pastors, in all likelihood, most of you had probably never even *heard* of the "emerging church movement" eighteen months ago. The issue more or less began to come to the forefront of discussion and debate in the evangelical movement after a cover article on the emerging church phenomenon in *Christianity Today* in November 2004.

Since then, critics of the movement have multiplied, and the movement has become the focus of intense debate and controversy. Most of the critics are deeply and legitimately concerned about the overall direction of the movement and its long-term influence on the rest of the church. Over the past six months, this has probably become the dominant issue in the agenda for evangelical discussion and debate—in an era when the evangelical movement was already troubled by (and not quite sure what to do with) issues like "Open Theism," "The New Perspective on Paul," and various other relatively recent controversies.

It would be easy, actually, to critique the emerging church movement by reviewing some of Brian McLaren's books, starting with *A Generous Orthodoxy*. The problem with that approach is that McLaren clearly does not speak for everyone in the "emerging church movement." Whenever critics try to analyze the movement by examining what McLaren has written, people within the movement simply dismiss the criticisms by suggesting that whatever McLaren says is his own opinion, and it doesn't necessarily reflect the movement itself.

That's partly true and partly a deliberate evasion. The emerging subculture clearly fosters an environment where theological mavericks like McLaren are pretty much encouraged to throw whatever bizarre and even heretical notions they like on the table for discussion. So I do think Brian McLaren is fair game, and because he is such a large figure in the movement, I can't really *ignore* him.

On the other hand, it's also true that although McLaren has had a profound influence in the shaping of the emerging church, he doesn't necessarily speak for everyone identified with the movement. To critique Brian McLaren is to critique Brian McLaren. It doesn't necessarily go to the heart of the movement itself. So I'm going to say a few words about Brian McLaren and then move on to other issues.

ABOUT McLAREN...

I gave a fairly lengthy review of one of Brian McLaren's books (*A New Kind of Christian*) in the seminar on I did on postmodernism last year, so you can read that transcript or listen to the recording if you want to understand more of my objections to McLaren.

I will also say that McLaren's book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is one of the absolute worst books I have ever read from Zondervan (and that's saying quite a lot). Frankly, I think it raises grave doubts about whether Brian McLaren is really "orthodox" in *any* sense of the word. He borrows a lot from *neo-orthodoxy*—and *that*, I think, is probably the *only* sense in which he is entitled to apply the term "orthodox" to himself. He does claim to accept both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, but he also makes it clear that he doesn't ultimately put much stock in the actual *propositions* that are affirmed in those or any other creeds, and he spends most of the book arguing against the idea that our defense of the Christian faith requires us to defend any of our actual doctrines.

Most of all, Brian McLaren is hostile to the idea that we can claim any degree of *certainty* about any point of truth. This is, by the way, not an obscure idea in Brian McLaren's works. This is one of the key points he labors to make almost any time he gets a platform to speak. He makes it clear over and over in all his books and lectures that he despises every *hint* of certainty or assurance. He thinks it is inherently arrogant and *unspiritual* to speak dogmatically about any point of spiritual truth.

And nothing epitomizes cocksure arrogance more in Brian McLaren's mind than radio preachers. He says it makes him angry to listen to Christian radio and hear preachers who seem so sure that the doctrines they believe and teach are really true. Authentic "humility," in Brian McLaren's opinion, must start with a refusal to insist on the absolute truth of any given proposition. And (other than his *absolute contempt* for overconfidence) he's not really even *absolutely* sure about the things he himself writes about.

McLaren portrays *faith* and *certainty* as opposing concepts. He says prefers the idea of *confidence* rather than "certainty," but he carefully qualifies himself to make clear that he will only tolerate a *relative* kind of confidence. He himself is not "absolutely certain" about *anything*.

I should add that McLaren wants it made clear that he is not saying no absolutes exist. He's only saying that *if* they exist, we can't *know* them with any kind of absolute certainty. And therefore, he says, we should never proclaim anything unequivocally. And he himself generally follows that rule (except when he is railing on the certainty with which radio preachers tend to speak.)

Brian McLaren says, "Certainty is overrated....History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren't." In a different interview, he said, "When we

talk about the word ‘faith’ and the word ‘certainty,’ we’ve got a whole lot of problems there. What do we mean by ‘certainty’? ...Certainty can be dangerous. What we need is a proper confidence that’s always *seeking* the truth and that’s *seeking* to live in the way God wants us to live, but that also has the proper degree of self-critical and self-questioning passion.”

McLaren himself is not sure about whether it’s proper to speak of homosexuality as “sin.” He recently published an article where he recounted how someone asked him where his church stood on the issue of homosexuality, and his answer was a lengthy apologetic for his own ambivalence on the issue. Here are his exact words:

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 conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think.

Then he added this:

Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we’ll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they’ll be admittedly provisional. We’ll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we’ll speak; if not, we’ll set another five years for ongoing reflection.

That, frankly, is Brian McLaren’s approach to everything. He has been pressed on several occasions to name any doctrines or truths that he feels are sufficiently clear to be proclaimed dogmatically or preached with conviction, and he has made it absolutely clear that conviction and the full assurance of faith are things he holds in high contempt.

He even has the audacity to ask for a universal moratorium on preaching about the sin of sodomy. Apparently, he thinks the rest of us should be silent about the matter until he makes up his own mind about it. (And he clearly even hints that he might *never* actually form a settled opinion on the matter. In fact, I can already tell you that if he follows his own epistemological convictions, he won’t. He *can’t*.)

So when Brian McLaren claims adherence to the ancient ecumenical creeds, that claim, by Brian McLaren’s own admission, is dubious. He’s not really sure about anything he believes.

By any historic evangelical standard, McLaren’s religion is not authentic Christianity at all. And it *does* frankly raise major questions about the whole “emerging church movement” when he is given so much credence by people in that movement.

He is in almost every way an exact replica of Harry Emerson Fosdick, adapted to suit the 21st-century *zeitgeist*. Most of you will understand exactly what I mean by that.

Enough about McLaren.

MY THREE MAIN CONCERNS

What else could possibly be wrong with the “emerging church movement”? (I’m not going to try for an exhaustive list. I wish you could see the stack of books I had to read over the past year as I prepared for this seminar. It’s literally a two-and-a-half-foot-high stack, and fully half of them are recent products of the Zondervan imprint called Emergent-YS, indicating the involvement of Emergent (Brian McLaren’s organization) and Youth Specialties, an organization that for years published the infamous evangelical satire magazine *Wittenburg Door*. Youth Specialties is also well known for publishing books of activities—outrageous games and grotesque or messy contests—for youth groups. Their literature has been a major influence in evangelical youth work for almost three decades now, and if you have ever been in youth ministry, you are probably familiar with them. These days, they are one of the main cheerleaders for the Emergent idea.)

I have friends who have suggested that the emerging church idea is the predictable fruit of churches that tailor their youth ministries to whatever style is currently fashionable, hold alternative church services for the youth in a separate building (“the youth building”) and never incorporate them into the actual life of the church itself. They’ve grown into adulthood while their styles and preferences were catered to in a special “church” service all their own. The *actual* church service was something they weren’t expected to like. Many of them were never really exposed to worship in the context of the actual church, with real adults. They were deliberately entertained instead, and thus they were conditioned to think that way. They grew old, but they never grew up, and now even as adults, they want to continue to play at church, but outside the mainstream of the *historic* church. (My friend characterized the emerging church worship style as “church services for the ADHD generation.” Read the *Christianity Today* account of Emergent’s national convention and you will understand why he said that.)

And while that is not the background of everyone in the emerging subculture, I’m sure there are a lot of people who fit that profile, including some of the key leaders in the movement. You’ll see what I mean if you read the *Christianity Today* article on the emerging church in the November 2004 issue.

Anyway, I could probably come up with a very long list of issues that concern me about the “emerging church movement,” but since we have so little time to pursue this, I have decided to boil it down and give you a short list of my top three current concerns about the “emerging church movement.” We can cover these very quickly, because I think you’ll understand my rationale for these concerns just based on what I have already said.

So here are the three things that disturb me most about the general drift of the movement:

1. It fosters contempt for authority. The New Testament idea of church government is not anarchy. It’s not even democracy or mobocracy. The church is certainly not supposed to be the sort of populist organization where everyone has an equal voice in everything that happens.

The contempt for structure in the “emerging church movement” is a thinly veiled aversion to authority. You will see that if you simply examine the angry comments that were posted at the Emergent-U.S. blog when it was announced that the new organization would have a “director.” Blogs and discussion forums associated with the movement were assaulted with complaints and angry criticisms. One member of the movement said, “A *director*?!! Nobody’s going to direct *me*! That’s why I left the traditional church.” Another guy wrote: “I think we are going in a horribly dangerous direction. We aren’t becoming a ‘conversation’; we’re becoming an institution. A ‘National Director?’ for a conversation? Give me a break.... I have a feeling we’re going down the Anakin Skywalker path here, folks.”

The whole movement's approach to Scripture is another major reflection of the widespread tendency within the movement, to show contempt for every kind of authority in the church. Brian McLaren insists that Scripture does not actually claim *authority* for itself. It claims to be *profitable*, he says, but not "authoritative."

As a matter of fact, the whole movement seems devoted to dialectical approach to truth. This, I think, explains the movement's aversion to the idea of preaching and its preference for the idea of "conversation." There's an underlying assumption that this is the best way to arrive at the truth: You have a thesis, and then an antithesis, and the truth is supposed to lie in a synthesis of those two contradictory ideas. That synthesis becomes the new thesis. It's answered by a new antithesis, and the synthesis of those ideas becomes the new thought. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. *Thesis, antithesis, synthesis*. It's a never-ending cycle.

That's the perspective of truth and epistemology proposed by the German philosopher Hegel: the *dialectical* method. All truth is ultimately determined that way. So it's fluid, never absolute. Truth changes all the time.

The dialectical method may indeed be a fairly accurate description of how public opinion develops. But we ought to know as Christians: *That's no way to discover truth*. Right?

Scot McKnight (who is an apologist for a number of the movements that are currently trying to expand the whole concept of evangelical Christianity) has written a sympathetic analysis of the "emerging church movement" that is worth reading if you want a decent description of the movement from a sympathetic perspective.

Scot McKnight says this: "[People in the "emerging church movement"] want to open up questions. They're asking questions about how we should understand our relationship to scripture: Is it inerrant? Is it true? And many of the emergent people are saying that [Scripture may not be absolute and authoritative and inerrant, but] it *is* the "senior partner" in the conversation." McKnight calls that "a healthy category." I don't think it is. I think it's just more evidence of how the "emerging church movement" fosters a contempt for authority.

Here's a second major concern I have:

2. *It breeds doubt about the perspicuity of Scripture.* You understand the principle of perspicuity? It speaks of the clarity—the "understandability"—of the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith says it like this: "All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, [so] that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." Perspicuity. The Bible is not too hard for us to understand.

The entire postmodern epistemology (their view of how we acquire knowledge of the truth) deliberately glorifies uncertainty. I already gave you some quotations about this from Brian McLaren, but you can read almost any writer in the movement and you will find this theme is relentlessly pressed.

The article in *Christianity Today* last year about the emerging church, for example, is a classic example of this. One of the central themes running through that article is the message that people in the "emerging church movement" have abandoned certainty, assurance, and strong convictions. They aren't dogmatic about what they believe, because they aren't really *sure* of what they believe.

The obvious implication here is that Scripture just isn't clear enough for us to say what it means with any kind of confidence.

In fact, that's more than an *implication* of the article. It's pretty much what these folks are expressly saying. Listen to this paragraph about the husband-and-wife pastoral team of one of the leading emergent-style churches in the country. This is about Rob and Karen Bell, who founded Mars Hill in Grand Rapids:

They found themselves increasingly uncomfortable with church. "Life in the church had become so small," Kristen says. "It had worked for me for a long time. Then it stopped working." The Bells started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself—"discovering the Bible as a human product," as Rob puts it, rather than the product of divine fiat. "The Bible is still in the center for us," Rob says, "but it's a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it." "I grew up thinking that we've figured out the Bible," Kristen says, "that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it's in color."

Ultimately, the emerging church message begins to sound like an echo of the voice of Satan in the garden: "Hath God said?"

This is a huge issue—in some ways, the pivotal issue. The overwhelming message coming from the "emerging church movement" often sounds like a flat denial of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture. That is a denial of one of the basic tenets of biblical Christianity, Protestant history, and evangelical conviction.

Yes, *parts* of Scripture are "hard to be understood." The apostle Peter acknowledges that in 2 Peter 3:16. But *the essential message* is simple and clear. The wayfaring man, though he be a fool, doesn't have to be confused by it, according to Isaiah 35:8. God has made Himself plain enough that there is much more than merely mystery to the Christian faith.

Quickly, here's a third thing that disturbs me about the "emerging church movement":

3. It sows confusion about the mission of the church. I'll just sum up my final point with this one observation: The "missional" emphasis in the "emerging church movement" seems to be entirely focused on an effort to adapt the church to the culture, with very little stress on the church's duty to proclaim a message of repentance and faith in Christ that calls men and women to forsake the world.

In other words, the "emerging church movement" seems to be all about the conversion of the church, rather than the conversion of the sinner.

In fact, I found *little or no* emphasis on conversion in any of more than a dozen books I read about the "emerging church movement". (Sometimes, emerging church writers adopt the language of postmodern narcissism and talk about "recovery," but that's as close as they usually get to discussing conversion.) It is simply not a major theme of discussion in the emerging conversation.

This is a glaring flaw in a movement that calls itself "missional."

The true mission of the church is embodied in the gospel message and the Great Commission. It is *truth* that demands to be proclaimed with clarity, and authority and conviction, and if you refuse to do that, even if you insist you are being "missional," you are not fulfilling the mission of the church at all.

Those are some of my main concerns about the "emerging church movement." *Can I make one of those absolute statements that make postmodernists grind their teeth?* There is absolutely no sense in which I would commend this movement to you, encourage you to join the

so-called “conversation,” or wade through the mounds of trendy literature in search of valuable helps and insights that might help your church.

Spiritually speaking, that literature points down a dead-end street into a blind alley on the bad side of town. I am convinced that this movement is going to be a serious detriment to the testimony of the church as a whole, a source of great confusion for many Christians, and another in a long series of movements that will surely undermine the work of the gospel rather than advance it. And I have no doubt whatsoever that those predictions will be proven correct within the next 10–20 years, if not sooner.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE “VALID POINTS”?

At the beginning, I said I think some valid points have been made by people in the “emerging church movement,” and some of you might be thinking that everything I’ve said since then makes that compliment ring rather hollow. That’s good because I didn’t want you to get the idea that if I commended something that has been said by someone in the “emerging church movement,” I’m endorsing the movement.

But in closing, I will say that I do think some of the points that have been made by people in the “emerging church movement” are good and valuable, and worthy of heeding.

For one thing, they are right to reject the professionalism and big-business approach to ministry that has been popularized by most of the influential megachurches.

They are right to point out that millions of American evangelicals live lives of gross hypocrisy and narcissism, ignoring the needs of the poor while indulging themselves with entertainments and luxuries while the church struggles, and many pastors live barely above the poverty level (if that), and our Christian brothers and sisters struggle in many parts of the world because they don’t even have clean water or basic medical care. We have the resources, and yet we are too prone to spend them on ourselves. I often think American evangelicals will have a lot to answer for when we are called to give account for our stewardship.

They are right when they complain about the way the evangelical movement has sold its birthright for a mess of Republican Party porridge. I obviously don’t agree with those who think a commitment to left-wing politics would be the right remedy. But I *do* think the evangelical movement should cut its ties with all political parties, get out of party politics completely, and get back to the business of preaching the gospel.

And they are right when they suggest we have not done enough to reach the outcasts and counter-cultural people in our society. I think their approach to reaching those segments of society is all wrong and largely counterproductive, but to adapt a phrase from D. L. Moody: I like the way some of them are *trying* to reach those people a lot better than I like the way many evangelicals simply ignore the task of evangelism.

Let me say that we can and should heed all those things without buying into the agenda of the “emerging church movement”—and certainly without abandoning the task of preaching the gospel with clarity and conviction. I hope we can take that challenge to heart, and minister accordingly, and look to Christ as the only true and trustworthy pattern for church ministry.

It’s not really that complex an issue, when you see it in that light.