

# Lessons from the Divide

*What can a church planter learn from both the proponents and critics of the 'Emerging Church?'*



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"The emerging church is being willing to take the red pill, going down the rabbit hole, and enjoying the ride. It is Dorothy not in Kansas anymore yet finding her way home."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karen Ward, quoted in Eddie Gibbs, Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, London: SPCK, 2006, 27

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As the size and influence of the emerging church grows, more people are writing about this recent movement in the western Christian church. More recently, the emerging church has been getting noticed by established theologians who have begun to offer critiques of the movement and a clear gulf between emerging church writers and conservative evangelical writers has become apparent. The widest-read proponent of emerging church is Brian McLaren and the most prominent critic to date has been Don Carson whose recently published book<sup>2</sup> offers the lengthiest analysis published so far.

In this study we shall analyse the emerging church primarily through the writings of Brian McLaren and Don Carson, though we shall discover a breadth of agreement on both sides of the divide.<sup>3</sup> We shall show where the writers agree and disagree and analyse why they have such different opinions through studying their worldviews. We shall also discover what lessons a church planting leader can learn from such a comparison as we think about how the church of the coming years can best shape itself to meet the needs of our current western culture.



*Mainstream churches attempt to attract people to go to them; the emerging church goes out to the people!*

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Our main texts will be Carson, *Becoming Conversant*; Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004; Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001

## Chapter 2: Towards a definition of the Emerging Church

What is the emerging church? Can we establish a definition? Because the term 'emerging church' is relatively new and writers struggle to define it, it is helpful to use a variety of quotations of those who have tried to do so. This will show the diversity of thought whilst providing a multi-coloured picture. Through these varied quotes we shall see the picture emerging of what is known today as the emerging church.

Firstly, and importantly, Moynagh points out that "emerging church is a broad term, with many bedfellows" and that "emerging churches come in a dizzy array of shapes and sizes."<sup>4</sup> He continues, "Key words perhaps are: contextual, customised, diverse, flexible and experimental."<sup>5</sup>

Gibbs and Bolger offer one possible definition: "Emerging churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time."<sup>6</sup> Gibbs and Bolger's whole book is an attempt at carefully describing and defining what the emerging church is, in contrast to the mainstream evangelical church which largely emerged from a modern worldview. They go on to talk about the emerging church movement as being disparate, diverse and fragmented. Furthermore, they point out that some leaders within – most notably Brian McLaren – don't even consider it to be a movement at all, but rather a 'conversation'.<sup>7</sup> This term, whilst feeling a little trendy, helps us to see that the movement is still in flux: essentially a non-defined group of western young church leaders who are informally conversing, trying to discover the most relevant way of being church in today's society.

Murray Williams points out that the emerging church is still, well, emerging: "Attempting to categorise the emerging church ... is like trying to nail jelly to a wall. The categories keep shifting as stories change, groups begin and evolve, and as our interpretation develops."<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere he describes emerging churches as "spiritually authentic, culturally attuned and attractive to others".<sup>9</sup> However, Murray Williams goes on to caution that "some attempt to describe and reflect is vital if we are to learn from what is happening."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, that is essentially the purpose of this dissertation: to describe, reflect and then to learn.

Baker points out that, "The term *emerging church* is nothing more than a way of expressing that we need new forms of church that relate to the emerging culture."<sup>11</sup> However, this definition demands a definition of emerging culture;

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro*, 11, 13

<sup>5</sup> Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro*, 11

<sup>6</sup> Eddie Gibbs, Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, London: SPCK, 2006, 28

<sup>7</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 29

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, quoted in Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro*, 14

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, 'Emerging churches in post-Christendom', *Emergingchurch.info*, September 2003, <<http://emergingchurch.info/reflection/stuarmurray-williams>> (accessed 1 March 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, quoted in Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro*, 14

<sup>11</sup> Jonny Baker, quoted in Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 41 (italics original)

what most people refer to as postmodernity. We shall return to this in chapter 3.

Carson points out that there is confusion when using the term 'emerging'. Some regard it as referring to the emerging early church in Acts; others the emerging church of the developing world; nevertheless, the widest use now is to refer to the churches that are emerging to take the kingdom to a postmodern generation.<sup>12</sup> However, Carson disappointingly adds to the confusion by making an incorrect assumption that the terms 'emerging' and 'emergent' both refer to the same group.<sup>13</sup> Again, we shall address this matter later.

A stated characteristic of emerging churches is that they recognise that the Kingdom of God is bigger and beyond the boundaries of the church; that "God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not."<sup>14</sup> One emerging church leader talks of "a quest for a holistic spirituality"<sup>15</sup> going on in western society, and likens the emerging church as tapping into that search, trying to answer the questions that searching people are asking. Emerging church writers are keen to point out that God is working in the hearts of people, including those who have not yet been in close contact with Christians. These are the people who are seeking, asking fundamental questions.

A further helpful metaphor used of emerging churches is that of an extended family: "The type of community seen in emerging churches pursues the kingdom in all spheres of reality, overcoming all sacred/secular divisions. Kingdom communities do not function as affinity groups but more like extended families."<sup>16</sup> Family members spend lots of time together and communicate frequently with each other. This shifts the focus away from being a Sunday-morning-only community to one of more friendship-based relationships. Gibbs and Bolger continue:

In Christendom, the Sunday meeting was the centre of corporate spiritual expression for the community. In a post-Christendom context, a church-meeting focus ceases to be indigenous to the culture or necessary to be faithful to the gospel. Instead, the practice of community formation itself is more central than the church meeting.<sup>17</sup>

Because of their chosen definitions Gibbs and Bolger are able to exclude certain forms of church from being defined as emerging churches. This would include Vineyard churches, Willow Creek-style seeker-sensitive churches and Saddleback-style 'purpose-driven' churches. They label these kinds of evolved or 'new paradigm' evangelical churches as either 'Boomer' or 'Gen-X'

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 11-12

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 12

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42

<sup>15</sup> Mark Scandrette, quoted in Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42

<sup>16</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44

<sup>17</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44

churches.<sup>18,19</sup> Others such as Burke (a former leader at Willow Creek) refer to them as 'pragmatic' churches.<sup>20</sup>

Carson notes an underlying assertion of emerging church writers that times are changing and that "Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the [culture]."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, we certainly live in a world of transition: older generations have grown up with a modern worldview, whereas younger generations (perhaps those born from the mid 1960s onwards) have been raised in very different environment – postmodernity. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that a new culture is emerging in the western world and that Christian leaders must adapt to this emerging worldview. However, we should be cautious not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater: there is still a valid place for pre-emerging forms of church to cater for the needs of those who prefer this model of church. In all that we discuss, we must remember that there has to be space for established and emerging churches to co-exist and live in godly unity.

Carson points out a genuine and noticeable characteristic: that many of the original emerging church leaders have come from traditional evangelical backgrounds, and have had issues with evangelicalism. He asserts that the roots of the emerging church are as a 'protest movement'.<sup>22</sup> There is undoubtedly some truth in this, as can be seen by the influence on the writers within the emerging church of, for example, Tomlinson's book.<sup>23</sup> However, whilst there may have initially been a sense of protest among *some* of the early leaders, this has largely been superseded by younger leaders who do not have the same history or issues with the established evangelical church.

Gibbs and Bolger warn us of a potential danger of not being clear about our definition of emerging church:

Popularly, [and incorrectly,] the term *emerging church* has been applied to high-profile, youth-oriented congregations that have gained attention on account of their rapid numerical growth; their ability to attract (or retain) twentysomethings; their contemporary worship...; and their ability to promote themselves to the Christian subculture.<sup>24</sup>

Is this really what emerging church, or just church for that matter, should be about? Lings both asks this question and offers his own answer:

What makes something church? It might be as simple as being both Christ-centred and communal. In addition, I value Robert Warren's

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<sup>18</sup> 'Boomer' refers to the post-war 'baby boomer' generation and 'Gen-X' refers to 'generation X', the generation that followed the baby boomers. Others, such as Carson, refer to Gen-Xers as 'Baby Busters', see D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Leicester: Apollos, 1996, 45

<sup>19</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 45

<sup>20</sup> John Burke in 'The Emerging Church and Incarnational Theology', in Robert Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, 51

<sup>21</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 12

<sup>22</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 14

<sup>23</sup> Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, London: Triangle/SPCK, 1995; McLaren identifies himself as a friend of Tomlinson in McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 133

<sup>24</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 41 (italics original)

definition of 3 intersecting circles of 'worship', 'mission', 'community' (with 'spirituality' at the heart).<sup>25</sup>

We don't have space here for an extensive investigation into what defines church. However, few would argue against these three core elements of 'worship', 'mission' and 'community.'

Having now shown the scope of different definitions of emerging church, I would like to propose Gibbs and Bolger's nine category description of an emerging church as being the most well developed set of guidelines so far. They offer three primary descriptors:<sup>26</sup>

- i. **identification with the exemplary life of Jesus** – within the emerging church there has been a "change of focus from the Epistles to the Gospels as a way to understand Jesus more profoundly."<sup>27</sup> The emerging church's preference for a narrative theology, coupled with the growing sense that the church needs some fundamental changes has driven emerging church leaders back to the Gospels to gain a fresh understanding of how Jesus interacted with the world.
- ii. **transformation of the secular realm** – emerging churches are reacting against the modernist sacred/secular split. Rather than allowing the church to become secularised, they are rising to the challenge of redeeming the part of the world that they inhabit.<sup>28,29</sup> As we shall see later, the emerging church is taking seriously the cultural divide that has opened up between the church and society.
- iii. **living of highly communal lives** – there has been a resurgence of seeing the church as a called group of people rather than a place to go.<sup>30</sup> The emerging church is responding to this by seeing themselves as God's chosen family.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, there has been a fundamental shift in defining church membership from confessional belief ('I believe, therefore I am included') to one of belonging ('I belong, therefore I am included').

And six secondary descriptors:

- iv. welcoming of the stranger
- v. serving with generosity
- vi. participation as producers
- vii. creativity as created beings
- viii. corporal leadership
- ix. participation in spiritual activities

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<sup>25</sup> George Lings, 'What is "Emerging Church"?', Emergingchurch.info, October 2003, <<http://emergingchurch.info/reflection/georgelings>> (accessed 1 March 2007)

<sup>26</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 45

<sup>27</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 48

<sup>28</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 66

<sup>29</sup> A foundational book in this area is James Thwaites, *The Church Beyond the Congregation*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999

<sup>30</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 90

<sup>31</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 97

These descriptors are based on a thorough investigation: Gibbs and Bolger interviewed more than 100 emerging church leaders over three years. Furthermore, these descriptors illuminate the distinctive characteristics of emerging churches whilst being wide enough to accommodate the large spectrum of styles.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, because these descriptors are so rich, they necessarily demand a large degree of unpacking. In order that we can move on to the current debate between the proponents and the critics, I can only refer you to the rest of their book for this worthwhile unpacking process.<sup>33</sup>

Now we have completed the task of defining the emerging church we must move on to examine why different writers are writing about the emerging church with such different opinions about its validity, and especially its orthodoxy.

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<sup>32</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 7-9

<sup>33</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, chapters 3-11

### Chapter 3: Understanding the proponents and critics

In order to correctly understand why the main players in the debate disagree so strongly we need to analyse their backgrounds, worldviews and approaches to theology. In order to do this task properly we should have a reasonable understanding of the difference between modernity and postmodernity. A short introduction to each can be found in Appendix A.

#### 3.1 Introducing the main players

As stated earlier, we are focusing largely on the writings of McLaren and Carson. McLaren is the pastor of a reasonably young church and writes generally about how to be a missional Christian in a postmodern society, though rarely explicitly about emerging church. He has been widely read by emerging church leaders and perhaps fuelled the fire of these emerging leaders more than any other single writer. McLaren comes from an evangelical background himself, though he has spent considerable time in an Episcopal church too. He says,

My own upbringing was way out on the end of one of the most conservative twigs of one of the most conservative branches of one of the most conservative limbs of Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

Carson also comes from a strong evangelical tradition (mainly Baptist) and is a professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He has lectured extensively on both postmodernity and the emerging church as well as writing the book we're focussing on.<sup>35</sup> He is broadly critical of much of the thinking behind the emerging church movement and is certainly unfavourable towards the writing of McLaren.

Yet we can observe that McLaren and Carson have so much in common: they are both Americans; both are from the same generation of baby-boomers (Carson was born in 1946, McLaren in 1956); both are mission-minded; both are committed to preaching the gospel; both have evangelical backgrounds; and both are prolific writers and public speakers. So why do these two men, with so much in common, hold such different points of view?

#### 3.2 Different worldviews between the different writers

Both McLaren and Carson talk extensively about modernity and postmodernity: McLaren in virtually all of his books spends some time outlining what they both are and how this affects our Christianity; Carson writes about modernity and postmodernity initially in his book *The Gagging of God*,<sup>36</sup> and latterly in *Becoming Conversant*,<sup>37</sup> as well as in several public lectures available online.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 40

<sup>35</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*

<sup>36</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, principally in chapter 12

<sup>37</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, principally in chapters 4, 5 & 6

<sup>38</sup> See P. J. Tibayan, 'D. A. Carson Audio sermons and lectures - Free from around the Web', *God is Better than All*, Walnut, California: P. J. Tibayan, 17 October 2006,

Both writers appear to associate themselves with different worldviews. Firstly, Carson is clearly dissatisfied with the spread of postmodernity.<sup>39</sup> By taking this stance he appears to indicate a preference for a modern worldview; though, to be fair to him, he shows self-awareness of his inherent worldview.<sup>40</sup> Carson encourages his readers to hold on to the accepted view of Christianity – that of conservative evangelicalism; to *remain* orthodox.

McLaren, on the other hand, is much more accepting of postmodernity. He is pragmatic about its influence and talks much more about how to engage it with the gospel. He uses the language of postmodernity in his books to connect with a younger and less mainstream evangelical audience. He encourages his readers to think differently about their world, their faith and the scriptures.<sup>41</sup> He is less concerned with upholding the accepted orthodoxy and keen to work out what orthodoxy should look like in our current world.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3 Differences in vocabulary use

As alluded to above, because of the writers' different worldviews, especially their different approach to postmodernity, McLaren and Carson naturally have a tendency to express themselves in very different ways. For example, Carson helpfully points out that,

For almost everyone within the movement, this works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality.<sup>43</sup>

There appears to be a new vocabulary that goes with the emerging church movement. Writers stress words such as 'discontinuity', 'deconstruction', 'paradox', 'mystical', 'metanarrative', 'radical' and even 'xenophilia'.<sup>44</sup> Postmodern Christians appear to rather enjoy using new language, particularly when it comes to suggesting how we should live out our Christian lives. For example, Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer, insipidly go as far as to suggest that "postmodern pilgrims will doubtless need to coin a number of new words to help us in our journey."<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps most striking is the way that McLaren and Carson approach the realm of truth and absolutes. Both McLaren and Carson discuss their opinions on the definition and epistemology of truth, but come to somewhat different

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< <http://pitibayan.wordpress.com/2006/10/17/d-a-carson-audio-sermonslectures/> > (accessed 5 May 2007) for a comprehensive list of Carson's online public lectures

<sup>39</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>40</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 115-116

<sup>41</sup> Amply demonstrated by the title of his book, *A New Kind of Christian*

<sup>42</sup> Illustrated by the title of his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*

<sup>43</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 29

<sup>44</sup> See Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, Jerry Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003 for a good list with somewhat uncritical explanations of many terms associated with the emerging church movement.

<sup>45</sup> Sweet, McLaren, Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 42

conclusions.<sup>46</sup> For example, in answer to the question, “Do you believe the Bible contains the objective truth of the Gospel and that this truth must be known and believed to be saved?”, McLaren replies, “I believe people are saved not by objective truth, but by Jesus. Their faith isn’t in their knowledge, but in God.”<sup>47</sup> This kind of answer is one of the things that riles many critics – someone asks a simple question and McLaren somehow manages to provide an evasive answer, almost saying, ‘you’re asking the wrong questions’. We shall return to this evasive behaviour later.

Conversely though, Carson takes three chapters of his book to carefully criticise his view of the emerging church’s handling of truth, describing its handling as falling short of a sound biblical view.<sup>48,49</sup>

### 3.4 Variance and disagreements amongst emerging church writers

It only takes a little reading to discover that there is no unified voice amongst the emerging church writers. Clear examples of this are found in Webber’s newly-published book.<sup>50</sup> For example Ward writes,

We are learning to embrace the fact that we are all heretics and idolaters – and bound to be so, because our conception of God inevitably differs from God’s true nature.<sup>51</sup>

Driscoll tersely responds,

Because the first commandment tells us not to be idolaters and 2 Peter 2:1-12 says heretics go to hell, idolatry and heresy are not something we should ‘learn to embrace.’<sup>52</sup>

Earlier in the same book Kimball writes, “I am still a conservative evangelical, but not ‘one of those’ conservative evangelicals,” referring to those who are “generally afraid of discussing any new expression of theology.”<sup>53</sup> This echoes McLaren’s words: “I am happy and honored to consider myself an evangelical... I should explain why I was careful not to capitalize the term in the previous sentence... ‘Big E’ Evangelical increasingly refers to the ‘Religious Right.’”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> An excellent book which covers the role of truth in a postmodern worldview in much more detail than our two writers is J. Richard Middleton, Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, London: SPCK, 1995

<sup>47</sup> Brian D. McLaren, ‘I need some clarification..’, *brianmclaren.net*, Spencerville: Brian McLaren, 10 April 2006, <<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000221.html>> (accessed 5 May 2007)

<sup>48</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, chapters 4, 5 & 6. Because this topic is so vast, and my space here limited, I must refer you to these chapters for a full analysis. Indeed Carson states that his chapter 4 here is a revision of his now well-known chapter 12 in Carson, *The Gagging of God*

<sup>49</sup> We return to this topic in section 3.7

<sup>50</sup> Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*. This book is a collection of separate chapters written by five different authors, with a critique at the end of each chapter by the other four contributors.

<sup>51</sup> Karen Ward, ‘The Emerging Church and Communal Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 164

<sup>52</sup> Mark Driscoll, responding to Ward, ‘The Emerging Church and Communal Theology’, in Webber, *Listening to the Beliefs*, 185

<sup>53</sup> Dan Kimball, ‘The Emerging Church and Missional Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 85

<sup>54</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 128

Whilst there are few formal networks within the emerging church movement, Brian McLaren, Karen Ward and Doug Pagitt are part of the most prominent network known as 'Emergent.'<sup>55</sup> This began "because many of [them] were disillusioned and disenfranchised by the conventional ecclesial institutions," and originally arose out of the Leadership Network.<sup>56</sup> Emergent has been sidelined by many emerging church leaders, most notably by Mark Driscoll, a former member and self-named neo-Calvinist,<sup>57</sup> who left the group shortly after McLaren joined on the basis of McLaren's over-pacifist and "liberal" views.<sup>58,59</sup> Driscoll is public in his views of Emergent and McLaren; indeed, we saw just previously that he does not pull his punches with the likes of Ward.<sup>60</sup> This demonstrates the point that we made right back in chapter 2 that 'emerging church' is a broad term and that the movement is disparate, diverse and fragmented.

### 3.5 Different approaches to theology

As we have seen, there are wide differences in theology even between emerging church leaders. However, there are also very different approaches to theology between the emerging church writers and conservative evangelical writers such as Carson.

Webber is a seminary professor and reports that some of his students who have looked into the emerging church frequently ask him, "What are they saying?" or "What is the fuss about?" or "I have listened, and I still don't get it."<sup>61</sup> Webber goes on to explain that, with the exception of Driscoll, most emerging church writers,

have not really addressed the theological issues in a way that many evangelicals are used to. The language ... does not have the clarity most desire. They do not speak in familiar categories. Their thoughts on theological issues seem slippery and difficult to pin down.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> This network is based around the website [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com) and a few linked blogs.

<sup>56</sup> Emergent-US, 'About » Emergent Village', Minneapolis: Emergent Village, <<http://www.emergentvillage.com/about/>> (accessed 17 April 2007)

<sup>57</sup> Mark Driscoll, 'Thank You, Jesus, for iTunes', *theresurgence.com*, Seattle: Resurgence, 13 June 2006, <[http://www.theresurgence.com/md\\_blog\\_2006-06-12\\_thank\\_you\\_jesus\\_for\\_itunes](http://www.theresurgence.com/md_blog_2006-06-12_thank_you_jesus_for_itunes)> (accessed 13 May 2007)

<sup>58</sup> Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 98-99

<sup>59</sup> Mark Driscoll in dialogue with John Piper and David Wells, 'A Conversation with the Pastors: Friday Evening Q & A', John Piper, *2006 Desiring God National Conference: The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, Minneapolis: Desiring God, 29 September 2006, <<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/MediaPlayer/1830/Audio>> (accessed 16 April 2007)

<sup>60</sup> The rest of Driscoll's response to Ward's contribution in Webber's book is equally forthright and uncompromising. Elsewhere in blogs and interviews he is equally outspoken. For example, see Mark Driscoll, 'Emerging vs. Emergent' on *YouTube*, ©Minneapolis: Desiring God, 18 July 2006, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCGM41cmSF4>> (accessed 6 May 2007)

<sup>61</sup> Robert Webber, 'Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology', in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 195

<sup>62</sup> Webber, 'Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology', Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 195

This causes many to wonder whether the writers are even evangelicals at all, or whether they are just some new form of liberals.

Rob Bell, pastor of a fast-growing emerging mega-church, illustrates this different paradigm by likening conservative evangelical theology to a brick wall: it forms something solid and dependable, marking the boundaries of our faith; however take one brick out and the whole wall is compromised. In contrast he describes emerging church theology as more akin to the springs on a trampoline: the Christian jumps on the trampoline and the springs are designed to be flexed and stretched; you can take out a spring to examine it and test it and the trampoline continues to function.<sup>63</sup>

Why do emerging church writers present such a different theology to their predecessors? Webber suggests that it is primarily due to the fact that they are not professional theologians, sitting down to work out a systematic theology, rather that they are practitioners; pastors who are trying to theologically make sense of the new postmodern world that they find themselves working in.<sup>64</sup> This means that their terminologies and arguments are not presented in any way resembling the writings of modern theologians; "Emerging pastors are coming to theological questions out of practice, not out of abstraction."<sup>65</sup> They are trying to address real, and frequently messy issues and questions that arise out of their postmodern flock in ways that make sense to them. This is in sharp contrast to most seminary professors who like to present a logical, self-contained, and complete systematic theology with no ragged edges or loose ends.

### **3.6 Hermeneutical approaches to scripture**

Because authors come to their writing with different backgrounds, they collectively show a variety of approaches to interpreting scripture. Carson, having written Bible commentaries, naturally has a very well developed approach. McLaren, on the other hand, has had no formal theological training. Upon looking at a passage of scripture, Carson will likely instinctively perform a thorough exegesis, probably referring to the original language. McLaren though may naturally see how the passage fits in with the world as he knows it and try to make sense of its context within the whole Bible story (metanarrative). However, McLaren has an unusual approach to the authority of scripture which differs significantly from conservative evangelical orthodoxy:

The authoritative text is never what I say about the text or even what I understand the text to say but rather what God means the text to say... The real authority does not reside in the text itself ... which is always open to misinterpretation ... the real authority lies in God, who is there behind the text.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, 18-28

<sup>64</sup> Webber, 'Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology', in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 198-199

<sup>65</sup> Webber, 'Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology', in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 199

<sup>66</sup> McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 50

It appears that McLaren here is denying the possibility that there can be an authoritative interpretation of scripture; denying that it is ever possible to know for sure what the Bible is actually saying.<sup>67</sup> Mappes suggests that McLaren is “denying the validity of the grammatical-historical-cultural method of biblical exegesis that evangelicals generally practice.”<sup>68</sup>

Carson, conversely, believes that “it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, he assumes that we at least have the possibility of getting very close to God’s intended meaning of the text. Indeed, he spends eight pages of his book demonstrating why he believes this to be true.<sup>70</sup>

This is no small difference that can be dismissed. As Christians living in a postmodern world we must decide for ourselves how scripture should be interpreted, for this will have a huge impact on how we believe it can be presented and applied.

### 3.7 Hermeneutical approaches to culture

We can see different approaches to interpreting culture between mainstream evangelicals and emerging church leaders. The primary difference is related to the worldview of the leadership – leaders raised in modernity are asking different questions to those raised in a postmodern world. Mainstream evangelicals appear to have become blind to the cultural divide between the church and the world. Gibbs and Bolger begin their book by warning us that we have missed this divide and must start afresh as cross-cultural missionaries, even in our own territories.<sup>71</sup> They go on to describe eleven reasons why this task is necessary for the western church. Essentially it comes down to the fact that, over the last 40 years, the world has been changing at a much faster rate than the church.

Over the last 15 years or so there has been an increase in the number of churches who see the importance of bridging this cultural divide. The first wave of these churches were the ‘pragmatics’ who tuned their services towards the needs of outsiders – seeker churches. However seeker churches are run by and for ‘boomers’ who still see existing forms of church as being relevant to themselves. The second wave is the emerging church, which is being run by postmoderns for postmoderns who see mainstream churches as culturally irrelevant. The emerging church is recognising the need to take this cross-cultural task seriously and become “missional in a world that is ... shaped by an incredible appetite for *worship* and *spirituality*. We live in a time of spiritual awakening.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> David A. Mappes, ‘A New Kind of Christian: A Review’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-Sept 2004), 296

<sup>68</sup> Mappes, ‘A New Kind of Christian: A Review’, 296-297

<sup>69</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 116

<sup>70</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 116-124

<sup>71</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 15

<sup>72</sup> Webber, ‘Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 200 (italics original)

### 3.8 Hermeneutical approaches to mission

As we move on to look at differences in approach to mission, Webber points out that this is a central part of the emerging church's ethos: "A crucial component of [emerging church] is the plea to recover the missiological dimension of the church, to be the church in *this* culture."<sup>73</sup>

In a world where truth is becoming a relative concept and a matter of personal conviction rather than an external absolute, people are showing an aversion to those who claim to have found the truth about a matter. Christians often find themselves as part of this group of people held in suspicion. Indeed, we claim not only to have found *some* truth but to have found the one absolute truth. Is this arrogant of us? Most Christians agree that this is not a matter of arrogance. However, the way we present this discovery, our contextualisation of this good news, determines whether or not we are regarded as arrogant by those around us. This is an important area where emerging church leaders and their critics disagree. Emerging church leaders emphasise that they can "agree with the postmodern culture in at least one thesis: 'No human has a lock on all truth.'"<sup>74</sup> In this they are separating themselves from having *appropriated* the full truth, yet not relinquishing the belief that they have *discovered the source* of all truth – God and his Word. Emerging church leaders talk of being on a journey towards God along with all seekers of the truth, they talk of learning from one another and helping others in their pursuit of finding the truth.<sup>75</sup>

Conversely, critics of the emerging church are much more sure of their scriptural exegesis and believe that they have appropriated a lot of the truth through this exegesis, though naturally not yet all of it. This gives them a different attitude toward those who are searching for the truth: as beacons of light, or as unmoving islands in a river in flood. To illustrate this, we can look at church planting methods. Modernists usually plant churches with ready-made models that offer particular ways of following the Christian life. For example, they plant Baptist churches that mimic their mother church, irrespective of whether the local population would choose that model of church. Postmodernists plant contextually relevant churches, usually with no pre-defined model.

As our representative conservative evangelical, Carson is by no means dismissive of the missionary task before us. Indeed, one biographer tells us that Carson, for all his scholarly writings, is first of all a minister of the gospel, not an academician.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, Carson speaks positively of the emerging church's "interest in evangelizing people who are often overlooked by the church."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Webber, 'Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology', Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 199 (italics original)

<sup>74</sup> John Burke in 'The Emerging Church and Incarnational Theology', Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 85

<sup>75</sup> This shows a 'centred-set' approach rather than the 'bounded-set' approach normally associated with conservative evangelical theology. For the background on set-theory see Paul G. Hiebert, 'The Category "Christian" in the Mission Task', *International Review of Mission* 287 (1983), 421-427

<sup>76</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, 'D. A. Carson', *Biblical Foundations*, <<http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/pdf/Carson.pdf>> (accessed 13 May 2007)

<sup>77</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 52

## Chapter 4: An analysis of the debate

So now we have seen why different authors write about the same subject from such polemic points we can move on to a more detailed analysis of the differences between the authors.

### 4.1 Carson's criticisms of McLaren

Although Carson has never met McLaren,<sup>78</sup> he describes him by saying that,

McLaren is, I suspect, a man that is very hard to dislike. There is a humorous cheekiness in him, a disarming self-deprecation ... when he is the most outrageous, you simultaneously want to wring his neck and give him a brotherly hug.<sup>79</sup>

And one can sympathise with Carson as McLaren can be deliberately provocative:

I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness and intrigue ... often stimulate more thought than clarity.<sup>80</sup>

In writing style Carson is significantly different to McLaren. Whereas McLaren's style is emollient, Carson is much more plain spoken, sometimes to the point of being brutal. He bluntly re-interprets the subtitle of *A Generous Orthodoxy*<sup>81</sup> calling the book, "attractive + manipulative + funny + sad + informed + ignorant + winsome + outrageous + penetrating + resoundingly false + stimulating + silly," further claiming that he uses these words more accurately than McLaren does his.<sup>82</sup>

Carson appears to be genuinely concerned with the theology of the emerging church: "The movement embraces a number of worrying weaknesses."<sup>83</sup> However, the vast majority of Carson's criticisms in his book are directed at McLaren. His criticisms are not only of his doctrines or hermeneutics, but even his style. Carson describes McLaren as being self-effacing, yet "slyly" using proof-texts to show that he is in line with scripture.<sup>84</sup>

Some of Carson's assertions are less polemic. He suggests that McLaren paints all evangelical Christians as being dogmatic and defensive.<sup>85</sup> This is somewhat true; there is a general sense in McLaren's books that he holds a fairly negative view of evangelical Christians. Yet we have already seen that McLaren

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<sup>78</sup> At least at the time of writing *Becoming Conversant*

<sup>79</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 158

<sup>80</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 26

<sup>81</sup> See Bibliography for the full title of McLaren's book

<sup>82</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 162

<sup>83</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 10

<sup>84</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 159

<sup>85</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 159

considers himself to be an evangelical Christian, albeit qualified with the use of a 'small e'.

Furthermore, Carson attacks McLaren's accuracy in describing the different denominational ways of emphasising aspects of Jesus.<sup>86</sup> In his chapter "The Seven Jesuses I Have Known", McLaren describes different aspects of Jesus that he has encountered through dialogue with different denominations of Christians, essentially making the point that no single denomination has the whole picture of who Jesus really is. However, in trying to do this Carson rightly finds obvious anomalies in his descriptions of the different denominations and their emphases on Jesus. For example, McLaren emphasises a *Christus Victor* version of Jesus in Catholicism: "Roman Catholics focus on the way Jesus saves the church by rising from the dead."<sup>87</sup> Carson retorts that this is neither the Jesus emphasised in popular Catholicism, which would be a baby Jesus in Mary's arms, nor in its catechism.<sup>88</sup> It would be difficult to argue with Carson here and on several other criticisms of McLaren's different denominational emphases of Jesus, which are related via his experiences with people from the different denominations rather than through good research.

Carson uses three examples of where he takes issue with McLaren's theology:

The atonement – Carson criticises McLaren for consciously avoiding the main historical views and pushing a narrow and unusual model as well as composing his own model. He also points out the basic lack of any biblical referencing and foundation for his arguments.<sup>89</sup>

Hell – Carson criticises McLaren for rebuking one of the characters in one of his books<sup>90</sup> for asking about the nature of hell at all, describing it as a "teacher's cheap shot: If you do not want to answer a question, make the student feel guilty for asking it."<sup>91</sup> Another example: in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren reports the following:

Recently I received an e-mail saying, 'I heard a rumour that you're a universalist. Is that true?' Since I don't offer my exclusivist friends their expected answer to 'the hell question,' I can see why this rumour would spread.<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, McLaren doesn't give any kind of clear answer to 'the hell question' in his book. Carson goes on to accuse McLaren of being selective with scripture, dropping the uncomfortable bits.<sup>93</sup>

Ethical issues – Carson criticises McLaren for avoiding scripture on 'hot potato' subjects and for avoiding giving any public opinions. For example, Carson

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<sup>86</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 159

<sup>87</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 59-60

<sup>88</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 159

<sup>89</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 166-168

<sup>90</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves in*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 167

<sup>91</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 169

<sup>92</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 124

<sup>93</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 169

reports that at a question and answer session at an Emergent conference McLaren avoided giving a direct answer on the topic of homosexuality. Instead he talked about evangelical methods of interpreting the relevant scriptures and how we should emphasise the humanity of the people involved.<sup>94</sup> This stance of McLaren's has been reinforced more recently through some of his blog postings, with some acerbic criticism from Driscoll.<sup>95,96,97</sup>

One can understand why McLaren often finds himself being criticised when he is so happy to be ambiguous or non-committal about subjects that conservative evangelicals often debate vigorously. Indeed, I believe this to be one of the primary reasons why Carson struggles with McLaren so much.

It is perhaps worth noting that Carson has given public lectures countering 'covenantal nomism' – the basic thesis of the 'new perspective on Paul' – as well as edited a two-volume set of articles on the same subject.<sup>98</sup> One of the most popular writers on covenantal nomism is N. T. Wright, and one of Carson's criticisms of the emerging church is its favourable reading of Wright.<sup>99</sup> Therefore we should perhaps be at least aware of Carson's presuppositions when he came to writing his book on emerging church.

One should not get the impression though that Carson is in complete disagreement in all areas with either McLaren or other emerging church writers. For example, there is a general agreement that Christians must take up the challenge to engage the current culture and communicate the gospel in relevant ways. Indeed, Carson devotes a whole chapter in his book to the way the emerging church 'reads the times,' generally praising this aspect of the movement:

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.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 170

<sup>95</sup> Brian McLaren, 'Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response', *Out of Ur: Following God's Call in a New World: Conversations hosted by the editors of Leadership journal*, Carol Stream, Illinois: Christianity Today, 23 January 2006, <[http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html)> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>96</sup> Mark Driscoll, 'Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question 3: A Prologue and Rant by Mark Driscoll', *Out of Ur: Following God's Call in a New World: Conversations hosted by the editors of Leadership journal*, Carol Stream, Illinois: Christianity Today, 27 January 2006, <[http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o\\_2.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o_2.html)> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>97</sup> Brian McLaren, 'Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question 4: McLaren's Response', *Out of Ur: Following God's Call in a New World: Conversations hosted by the editors of Leadership journal*, Carol Stream, Illinois: Christianity Today, 30 January 2006, <[http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o\\_3.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o_3.html)> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>98</sup> D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, Mark A. Seifrid (Eds.), *Justification And Variegated Nomism (2 vol. set)*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004

<sup>99</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 182

<sup>100</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 45

His caveat though is that the things he finds encouraging and hopeful are not universal in the movement.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, to conclude this section, Carson informs us that he has grave concerns about McLaren's theology: "I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything,... McLaren ... [has] largely abandoned the gospel."<sup>102</sup>

#### 4.2 Criticisms of McLaren by other writers

Carson is by no means McLaren's only critic. Many (including Carson too) have criticised McLaren for logically contradicting himself. For example, Mohler states that McLaren

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.<sup>103</sup>

However, Gibbs points out that

McLaren makes an easy target for a philosophical theologian. He is unsystematic and speculative... His strength lies in the questions he is prepared to face ... rather than in his responses.<sup>104</sup>

Mohler goes on to criticise McLaren for his aversion to directly answering questions, such as on the issues of homosexuality and hell. He shows frustration when McLaren refers to such questions as "weapons of mass distraction."<sup>105,106</sup> This avoidance of answering is naturally an answer in itself. Clearly one cannot go through life avoiding issues that, to many, are of fundamental importance. One can perhaps understand McLaren not wanting to answer certain questions in a particular context (such as a book) and offer to address them elsewhere, however to dismiss such questions as a distraction is to diminish their fundamental importance. Mohler rightly concludes: "A responsible theological argument must acknowledge that difficult questions demand to be answered."<sup>107</sup>

#### 4.3 Emerging Church writers' responses to criticism

Proponents of the emerging church have responded to their critics, though mainly online. However, McLaren's dislike of responding directly to controversial

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<sup>101</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 45

<sup>102</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 186

<sup>103</sup> Albert Mohler, "'A Generous Orthodoxy' – Is It Orthodox?", *albertmohler.com*, 20 June 2005, <[http://albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2005-06-20](http://albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-06-20)> (accessed 11 May 2007)

<sup>104</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 'Emerging Solutions – and Problems: D. A. Carson's Theological Analysis of Brian McLaren, et al', *Christianity Today* 49.10 (October 2005), 93

<sup>105</sup> Mohler, "'A Generous Orthodoxy' – Is It Orthodox?'

<sup>106</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 42

<sup>107</sup> Mohler, "'A Generous Orthodoxy' – Is It Orthodox?'

questions appears to include responding to criticism of his own writing. He has written a very brief response to Carson's book on Amazon.com, where he expresses his view that he has been substantially misrepresented by Carson's book.<sup>108</sup> Elsewhere McLaren has responded generally to Carson's and others' criticisms: "Unfortunately, in a number of ways their reviews misrepresent and misjudge my writings, thinking, and beliefs."<sup>109</sup> However, he has not otherwise directly and publicly responded to these alleged misrepresentations.

It is disappointing that the fullest response to public criticisms is in the form of a very general joint letter by the board of Emergent, not solely McLaren.<sup>110</sup> However, again this does not go into much detail about their theology, and does not explain their positions on any of the 'hot potatoes'. Rather it focuses on how they are choosing to react to their critics by continuing the conversation.

As we saw earlier, Carson has been accused of characterising the emerging church as largely a protest movement. Gibbs criticises Carson, countering that "for many emergent leaders, the issue is not to protest the old so much as a restlessness to find new ways of 'doing church.'"<sup>111</sup> Indeed, it is unfair to characterise the whole emerging church movement as a reaction against conservative evangelicalism. However, by focussing on McLaren's writing it is understandable why Carson may have got this impression, as there is a strong sense of reaction against conservative evangelicalism in McLaren's works.

Finally, one unsympathetic reviewer of Carson's book suggests that he

sets out to discuss what's right and wrong with EC, but because of obviously deep-seated and heartfelt passions about particular doctrines..., he strays far from his chosen topic and attempts to answer a question he has not rightly raised, leaving the reader with ... a grossly misshapen picture of the EC.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> B. McLaren, 'correction of another review', *Amazon.com: Profile For B. McLaren: Reviews*, Seattle: Amazon.com, 16 July 2005,

<<http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A3DKMXMP8CGLZK>> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>109</sup> Brian McLaren, 'Responses to Recent Criticisms', *brianmclaren.net*, Spencerville: Brian McLaren, 10 April 2006, <<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000342.html>> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>110</sup> Tony Jones, et al, 'Our Response to Critics of Emergent', *emergent-us*, Minneapolis: Emergent Village, 29 October 2005, <[http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/official\\_respon.html](http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/official_respon.html)> (accessed 11 May 2007)

<sup>111</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 'Emerging Solutions – and Problems: D. A. Carson's Theological Analysis of Brian McLaren, et al', *Christianity Today* 49.10 (October 2005), 93

<sup>112</sup> C. J. Richardson, 'Category Error?', *Amazon.com: Profile For C. J. Richardson: Reviews*, Seattle: Amazon.com, 13 August 2006, <<http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A2Q6RFQ6VOSR00>> (accessed 18 April 2007)

## Chapter 5: Lessons for a church planter

Having analysed the background to the debate, as well as some aspects of the debate itself, we shall now move on to distil out some points that can teach all Christians today, but particularly with church planters in mind. Many church planters today are keen to explore both how to contextualise the gospel in the most appropriate and effective way and also how the emerging church has been attempting to do the same.

### 5.1 Approach to Scripture

Having seen that McLaren takes a different view of scripture to most evangelicals, one where our interpretation can never be assured, and having seen that Carson prefers a much more rigorous approach to hermeneutics, how should today's church planters approach biblical interpretation?

I would suggest that, rather than abandon our modernist evangelical heritage of biblical exegesis, we should learn from it and discover how to apply the truth that we find in scripture in today's world. The world of biblical exegesis rarely stands still and we would do well to keep abreast of the latest developments in this field. Osbourne points out that "critics increasingly deny the very possibility of discovering the original, or intended, meaning of a text."<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the title of Osbourne's book points to the fact that we spiral "nearer and nearer to the text's intended meaning as [we] refine [our] hypotheses."<sup>114</sup> Recent writers such as Witherington are discovering new hermeneutical methods which help us to continue in our spiralling towards the true meaning.<sup>115</sup>

I commend the approach of Driscoll, who generally remains conservative in his approach to scripture and recognises its centrality in the Christian faith. Driscoll does not dismiss other aspects of Christianity, yet holds that it must shape everything that we do:

A Christian use of the Bible does not dismiss lower courts of authority such as experience, tradition, or archaeology, but reserves the clear teachings of Scripture as the metaphorical Supreme Court of final authority.<sup>116</sup>

Carson criticises McLaren for his (indisputably) scant use of scripture in his writings. This same criticism cannot be applied to Driscoll whose writings are peppered with biblical support throughout. Indeed, Driscoll's results are self-evident: he has quickly built up a church of over 5000 in a relatively unchurched city from a sector of society who have largely been ignored by mainstream

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<sup>113</sup> Grant R. Osbourne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1991, 7

<sup>114</sup> Osbourne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 6

<sup>115</sup> Witherington looks more deeply at the social and political contexts of biblical material than many previous writers, offering an enriched interpretation and often unlocking former paradoxes. See for example Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998

<sup>116</sup> Mark Driscoll, 'The Emerging Church and Biblicist Theology', in Webber, *Listening to the Beliefs*, 25

churches.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Driscoll is a successful church planting facilitator – having planted over 100 new churches through the Acts 29 network.<sup>118</sup>

## 5.2 Cultural exegesis

Church leaders of all kinds face a constant need to decipher what is going on in our society. This is particularly true for church planters who have a pressing need to have a sharp evangelism strategy (not that any church leader can excuse himself on this score). Exegeting the culture is no simple task and inevitably requires some bravery to deal with things that are uncomfortable for Christians and go where many conservative Christians dare not tread. The emerging church is taking this task seriously.

There is a tendency when we feel out on a limb and uncertain about our position on a matter that in public we can retreat into a more conservative position than is actually going on in our heads. Webber warns us that, because of the vocal pressure being brought to bear on emerging church leaders, there is a danger that they might stop asking relevant questions of our culture; stop answering their questions; stop trying to develop a contemporary and relevant theology. This would be at the risk of them falling back “into the common abstract theology of the evangelical church,” which tries to validate its theology through “rational arguments and evidential apologetics.”<sup>119</sup> Or, in other words, crumbling under the conservative theologians’ logical and well-stated criticisms. If emerging church leaders are to remain true to their convictions they must be confident in what they believe and press on in their efforts to exegete our culture.

But how do we exegete culture? How should we engage our society? Driscoll asserts that we must learn (or re-learn) how to listen to non-Christians and discover how they are trying to make sense of their lives, find meaning and deal with their problems.<sup>120,121</sup> Only then can we understand how to address their presuppositions and convince them of their need for Jesus. Gibbs continues this theme, asserting that “a missionary engagement requires immersion in culture, to listen and ask questions. A missionary then proposes responses from the gospel, rather than imposing a message.”<sup>122</sup>

To do this cultural exegesis we need to go where people gather: coffee shops, bars, social networking websites (such as MySpace), speed-dating sessions, etc. Why are these people there, and not in our church? What’s going on in their

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<sup>117</sup> Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 9

<sup>118</sup> Acts 29, ‘Acts 29 > United States’, [www.acts29network.org](http://www.acts29network.org), Seattle: Acts 29, <<http://www.acts29network.org/churches/united-states>> (accessed 14 May 2007)

<sup>119</sup> Webber, ‘Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 200

<sup>120</sup> Mark Driscoll, ‘Relating to Sinners’, on *YouTube*, ©Minneapolis: Desiring God, 18 August 2006, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEHIYAMaxf8>> (accessed 8 May 2007)

<sup>121</sup> It was Pollard that called this process positive deconstruction: analysing people’s worldview, and seeing where it varies with Kingdom values. See Nick Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, Leicester: IVP, 1997, 43-59

<sup>122</sup> Eddie Gibbs, ‘Emerging Solutions’, 94

lives? It can be argued that this is exactly what Jesus did – he met with sinners at parties, learned to understand their culture, then showed them what was wrong with their worldview and offered them salvation. An example of this is the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). It is worth noting that Jesus finishes this episode by saying that he came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Missional Christians should not forget the seeking bit here – that it is *we* who should seek people who are lost (in sharp contrast to the seeker church model that attempts to attract people).

### 5.3 Approach to Theology

As times change, how should a church planter approach theology in an appropriate manner? Looking back, it could be said that the conservative evangelicals were good at doing theology but weak on ministry, whereas pragmatic churches have been good on ministry and weak on theology. Webber suggests that the emerging church has a wonderful opportunity to reconnect theology (theory) with ministry (practice) to truly work out how to do reflective practice (praxis).<sup>123</sup> However, the challenge is to walk the tightrope of staying faithful to, and rooted in the scriptures, whilst remaining relevant to, and connected with our postmodern generation.

Webber goes on to suggest that emerging church leaders are prepared to move on from their conservative evangelical roots: “Emerging leaders do not want a closed theological system all neatly tied together by reason and logic. They call us to a more open view of theology with room for mystery.”<sup>124</sup> As we saw Driscoll suggest earlier, we shouldn't rule out things such as experience but that we should always weigh these against the Bible.

### 5.4 Approach to Mission

What lessons can church planters learn in relation to the missionary task? We would do well to be aware that we are not purveyors of goods and services seeking to increase our market share. Rather we should see ourselves as missional Christians with a message, seeking to communicate this truth in the most effective way possible (contextualisation). We should move away from the attitude of offering our community something that will draw them in and change them, and towards being a church with changed people who are going out to meet the needs of our community through our existing networks. Paul reminds us to communicate “by all means” (1 Cor 9:22). We should keep our biblical doctrines non-negotiable, yet be highly flexible in our contextualisation.

The emerging church movement focuses on the narrative of the Bible rather than the propositional truths contained within. There is a tendency for emerging adherents to ‘tell their story’ whilst allowing other people to tell their own story. Whilst this is a part of showing respect for people we should be careful not to make the mistake of placing equal value on all ‘stories’. A fundamental part of

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<sup>123</sup> Webber, ‘Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 200

<sup>124</sup> Webber, ‘Conclusion: Assessing Emerging Theology’, in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 199

the Christian faith is the belief in the exclusivity of the gospel. It is not simply another story, it is God's redemptive story that saves the world, and can save anyone in it. We should resist the temptation to water down the gospel to make it more palatable, or take away any parts of it that are difficult for our postmodern age to swallow. Mohler wisely warns us, "The gospel simply is not up for renegotiation in the twenty-first century."<sup>125</sup>

How do we define who is and isn't a Christian, who is included in the family of God? Gibbs argues that perhaps a primary difference between Carson (and like-minded thinkers) and emerging church writers is their views on their use of set-theory: bounded-set (in/out) or centred-set (travelling towards or away from the centre: Christ)<sup>126</sup> By referring to Hiebert<sup>127</sup> we can see that generally emerging church leaders talk in terms of centred-sets – using language such as 'we're all on a journey,' and 'belonging' rather than 'believing.' As we reflect on this missiologically, it offers an inclusive rather than exclusive way of communicating to those we are working with, allowing us to aid God in his drawing in of people.

### **5.5 Dialoguing with leaders/theologians with a different worldview**

Today's church planters will doubtlessly need to communicate effectively with leaders of other churches and be able to share their vision and explain their methodologies. In order to do this the church planter must be prepared to listen to others and understand their presuppositions/worldview. We should learn from Carson's failings in his dialogue whilst critiquing the emerging church movement,<sup>128</sup> and be ready to enter into a humble dialogue, remembering Jesus' prayer that we might all be one (John 17:21).

Gibbs encourages dialogue between the sides for mutual benefit:

Rather than becoming antagonists, Carson and McLaren should continue in dialogue, so the academic theologian and the missional practitioner might be mutually enriched and refocused.<sup>129</sup>

Therefore, as we come towards our conclusion, let us minister in the ways that we feel God has called us to and dialogue together so that we might all be 'enriched and refocused.'

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<sup>125</sup> Mohler, "A Generous Orthodoxy" – Is It Orthodox?

<sup>126</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 'Emerging Solutions', 95

<sup>127</sup> Hiebert, 'The Category "Christian" in the Mission Task', 421-427

<sup>128</sup> Refer to Appendix B for the issues raised in this dialogue

<sup>129</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 'Emerging Solutions', 95

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

### *Strengths*

We have been able to see several strengths demonstrated in the emerging church. It has been acknowledged to be better at reading and interpreting our postmodern world than other forms of church. Because of this it is able to do a better job of contextualising the gospel (e.g. exploring wider spiritualities, using contemporary worship styles). It is prepared to be flexible and practical in its structures and operation. It is highly mission-focused, actually mobilising its members to the job of 'getting out there' and reaching unreached generations.

### *Weaknesses*

We are now aware too of certain weaknesses that have been shown in the writings of emerging church leaders. Emerging church writers have been accused of 'cavalier' approaches to interpreting the scriptures.<sup>130</sup> They have had the finger pointed at them for being reactionary and forming separatist churches as a form of protest to conservative evangelical beliefs. Carson rightly criticises some writers for seeing postmodernity as a saving grace for the church rather than just accepting it as the cultural background in which we minister.<sup>131</sup>

### *Opportunities*

And so, as missional Christians, we must learn to minister the gospel with our Bible clasped in one hand and the other hand open to demonstrate the love of God. Our world is not just in need of truth, but *The Truth*, and it must be demonstrated in action in ways that people understand and recognise. Furthermore, we must communicate together and live together in unity with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

As we come to a close, we can see that we live today in a world of opportunity: western society is in a state of flux, there are significant signs of change in the western church, and there are many innovative ideas of how Christians should reach out and touch our current postmodern world. In an illustration of hope for the future, Webber writes,

Leaders of emerging churches may very well be poised to bring about a new threshold of development that will carry a new group of evangelicals beyond the unhappy split between traditional theology on the one hand and pragmatic practice on the other.<sup>132</sup>

These leaders, and their successors, have the opportunity to learn from their critics and transform western society with the kingdom of God.

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<sup>130</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 168-169

<sup>131</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 75

<sup>132</sup> Robert Webber, 'Introduction: The Interaction of Culture and Theology', in Webber (Gen. Ed.), *Listening to the Beliefs*, 16

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## Appendix A: Introducing modernity and postmodernity

In order to understand the debate between the emerging church and conservative evangelical writers it is necessary to be reasonably familiar with the terms modernity and postmodernity. The reason for this is that many writers, particularly the emerging church writers, associate conservative evangelicals with modernity and emerging church proponents with postmodernity.

Firstly it is necessary to briefly point out the difference between modernism and modernity (and likewise postmodernism and postmodernity). 'Modernity' is a term used to describe the *condition of being* in the 'modern' era, whereas 'modernism' describes the *culture within* the modern era, especially its art (likewise with postmodernity and postmodernism). However, it is often seen that the terms are used interchangeably. I have endeavoured to refer only to the -ity form in this essay in order to stay true to these definitions. Carson and McLaren, on the other hand, prefer to use the -ism forms.<sup>133</sup>

What do the terms modernity and postmodernity mean in a Christian context, particularly relating to our debate here? Unfortunately, as Carson points out, "neither modernism or postmodernism are easy to define. Even experts in intellectual history disagree on their definitions."<sup>134</sup> Gibbs and Bolger point out that "modernity and postmodernity have many definitions, as many as there are different spheres of study."<sup>135</sup> Further complicating the issue, Carson rightly educates us that "both modernism and postmodernism are far too stereotyped in a lot of popular discussion."<sup>136</sup> He continues,

the fundamental view 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.<sup>137</sup>

Postmodernity, on the other hand

recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, is 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 be true or right.<sup>138</sup>

McLaren lists five 'core values' of postmodernity:<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> See entries for modernity, modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism at *Wikipedia*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/>> for further information.

<sup>134</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 25

<sup>135</sup> Gibbs, Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44

<sup>136</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 26

<sup>137</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 27

<sup>138</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 27

<sup>139</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 162-164

1. Postmodernity is sceptical of certainty
2. Postmodernity is sensitive to context
3. Postmodernity leans toward the humorous
4. Postmodernity highly values subjective experience
5. For Postmoderns, togetherness is a rare, precious, and elusive experience

He goes on to refute two common myths about postmodern Christianity:<sup>140</sup>

1. Postmoderns don't believe in absolute truth
2. Postmoderns don't care about truth

There is not the space here to go into further depth on the subject, but I would refer you to the references cited here for worthwhile further study.

It is perhaps worth pointing out at this point that Carson is certainly no fan of postmodernism, calling it "the bastard child of modernism,... illegitimate".<sup>141</sup> McLaren, on the other hand says that, to the outsider "the postmodern world is easy to critique, even to ridicule. But from the inside, it's not odd at all: It's just the way things are."<sup>142</sup>

Nevertheless, whilst Carson may be dismayed at the entrance of postmodernism, he is still concerned with the task of evangelising the generation that is growing up within it.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 166-167

<sup>141</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 26

<sup>142</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 159

<sup>143</sup> Carson covers this in several places, for example Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 491-514 (Chapter 12); D. A. Carson (Gen.Ed.), *Telling the Truth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, 384-398 (Chapter 28); Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 45-49

## Appendix B: The argument dialogue (or lack of it)

There have been several published criticisms about Carson's methodology in writing his book *Becoming Conversant*. Here I would like to highlight some of these criticisms to help in educating us as we ourselves look to dialogue with people of different traditions, particularly emerging church leaders and conservative evangelical leaders. This appendix links in with my lesson in section 5.5, dialoguing with leaders/theologians with a different worldview.

Firstly, McLaren points out that Carson did not contact him before his book was published.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, Carson has not personally attended any emerging church events prior to publishing his book or sought to clarify any of his criticisms of the emerging church writers. This has led to McLaren stating in his 'review' on Amazon that "many of the misunderstandings in the book could have been clarified if there had been actual conversation," and that Carson's book "misinterprets my friends and me on some important points."<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, McLaren informs us that

some others who were named in the book ... attempted to talk with Dr. Carson before this book was published, hoping that he would truly become conversant with us by visiting at least a few of our churches and conversing in person. Those invitations were not accepted.<sup>146</sup>

These points strike me as being very odd and a serious oversight for such a well respected academic theologian. McLaren notes that he has happily been able to begin dialogue with Carson since the book was published.<sup>147</sup>

Secondly, Carson's choice of books to critique has been challenged. Carson asserts that "most emergent leaders regard [McLaren] as their pre-eminent thinker and writer."<sup>148</sup> This is strictly an over-generalisation. Whilst this is specifically true of most Emergent (with a capital E) leaders,<sup>149</sup> as we have noted in the dissertation text, McLaren has been shunned by some emerging church leaders outside of the Emergent organisation. This is perhaps one of the most serious errors of judgement that Carson makes in his book; essentially tarring all emerging church leaders with the same brush that he uses on McLaren.

One emerging church leader notes that "Carson's book was originally titled 'Becoming Conversant with Emergent [sic]' which in fact better describes the book, since he really only addresses one or two authors and not the emerging church as a whole."<sup>150</sup> As I state in the dissertation, 'Emergent' is one stream within the emerging church movement and in no way reflects the breadth of expression or theological opinions of the whole movement.

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<sup>144</sup> McLaren, 'correction of another review'

<sup>145</sup> McLaren, 'correction of another review'

<sup>146</sup> McLaren, 'correction of another review'

<sup>147</sup> McLaren, 'correction of another review'

<sup>148</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 157

<sup>149</sup> McLaren is one of the founders and the current Chair of Emergent

<sup>150</sup> Brother Maynard (pseudonym), 'Carson v. Emergent v. Forge', *Subversive Influence*, Winnipeg: Brother Maynard, 21 July 2005, <<http://www.subversiveinfluence.com/wordpress/?p=300>> (accessed 18 April 2007)

Ryan K. Bolger further clarifies this: "If the goal of *Becoming Conversant* was simply to survey those authors who influence the Emerging Church, or those who influence the movement epistemologically, the right books were not selected."<sup>151</sup> He criticises Carson for choosing mainly two authors: McLaren supposedly representing the US emerging church and Steve Chalke representing the UK emerging church. Carson's argument is diminished somewhat by his choice of target authors, Chalke being only a minor voice within the UK emerging church scene. It appears that Carson's basic reasons for lumping McLaren and Chalke together are because McLaren has praised one of Chalke's books on its cover,<sup>152</sup> coupled with his premise that they both write in similar ways about the atonement.<sup>153</sup> In fact, the UK emerging church's primary voices are generally the same as the USA's with N. T. Wright and Dallas Willard being important influential writers too.<sup>154</sup>

Finally, it is pleasing to note that since Carson published his book there has been a conference in Australia where Carson gave a lecture on the emerging church. Immediately after his lecture there were responses from several emerging church leaders, and Carson responded once more.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ryan K. Bolger, 'D. A. Carson: Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church', *TheBolgBlog*, Pasadena: Ryan K. Bolger, 26 May 2005, <[http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2005/05/d\\_a\\_carson\\_beco.html](http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2005/05/d_a_carson_beco.html)> (accessed 18 April 2007)

<sup>152</sup> Steve Chalke, Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003

<sup>153</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 182-187

<sup>154</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 'Emerging Solutions', 93

<sup>155</sup> See <http://forgewa.org.au/audio.html> for audio recordings of this conference