

Appropriate Response to the Emerging Church Movement

© By [David Kowalski](#)

Postmodernism & the Emerging Church Movement

Looking out of the windows of our homes we respond indifferently to the presence of dirt on the ground. Should that dirt makes its way into our homes, however, our feelings change and we proceed to sweep it out *because it does not belong there*. In [John 2:14-16](#) [1], after passing passively through the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus' passivity gave way to angry expression as he proceeded to sweep clean the house of God. John says in verse 15 that when Jesus saw the money changers "He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple." It seems that while God opposes all error and sin, he is especially passionate about expressing this opposition when error and sin come into his house and when his children are affected. In [Galatians 5:12](#) Paul models the heart and actions of a servant of God responding to an internal corruption of the church as he says "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves." The intensity of his response is dictated by his zeal for God and his love of the Church. Servants of God *feel* the inappropriateness of God's house being defiled. God's shepherds *feel* responsible for guarding the flock. This divinely inspired, holy passion compels an appropriate response when God's house is trashed and his people are deceived.

Unfortunately, many evangelical shepherds, who have passed from a prophetic to a professional model of ministry too readily welcome wolves into God's flock if those wolves are decked out in the latest, trendiest garb. The cutting-edge [heresy](#) that is being welcomed by many Evangelicals today is known as the Emerging Church movement. While many participants in this movement undoubtedly know and love Christ, and while many of their criticisms of evangelical tendencies are well founded, their concessions to relativism inevitably lead them downward to serious doctrinal and moral deviations that they bring into the household of God.

The Emerging Church movement consists of a diverse group of people who identify with [Christianity](#), but who feel that reaching the [postmodern](#) world requires us to radically reshape the church's beliefs and practices to conform to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a term that has been dissected

and broken down into various schemes of subcategories and there is not absolute unanimity among postmodern thinkers. Nevertheless, there are certain defining characteristics of this phenomenon that grew in the late twentieth century out of some elements that always existed in modernism. [2] Grenz and Franke summarize postmodernism as "...the rejection of certain central features of the modern project, such as its quest for certain, objective, and universal knowledge, along with its dualism and its assumption of the goodness of knowledge. It is this critical agenda, rather than any proposed constructive paradigm to replace the modern vision that unites postmodern thinkers." [3]

Postmodernism rejects the basic premises of modern epistemology. [4] In modernist thought perception corresponds to truth and language refers to an independent referent. [5] Douglas Groothuis describes the correspondence theory of truth as the assumption that "A belief or statement is true only if it matches with, reflects, or corresponds to the reality to which it refers. For a statement to be true it must be factual. Facts determine the truth or falsity of a belief or statement." [6] For Groothuis, this theory harmonizes with the presuppositions he finds clearly implied and presupposed in Scripture: "The Bible does not relate a technical view of truth, but it does implicitly and consistently advance the correspondence view in both testaments." [7]

The referential theory of language is the view that language refers to something objectively real in the mind of the one who communicates. Communication is not seen as ambiguous verbalizations that can have various private meanings for each hearer independent of the author or speaker's original intent. Just as Groothuis finds the correspondence theory of truth presupposed in the Bible, Justin Taylor finds the referential theory of language similarly presumed in Scripture:

Nothing could be clearer from the New Testament, it seems to me, than the idea that God has given us universally true doctrinal revelation that can be understood, shared, defended and contextualized. 'The faith' has been once for all delivered to the saints ([Jude 3](#)). We are to guard the 'good deposit' entrusted to us ([1 Tim. 6:20](#); [2 Tim. 1:14](#)), instructing in 'sound doctrine' and rebuking contrary doctrine ([Titus 1:9](#); [2:1](#)). False doctrine is associated with conceit and ignorance ([1 Tim 6:3-4](#)), and we are commanded not to be tossed to and fro by its winds ([Eph. 4:14](#)). [8]

Postmodern rejection of these two principles causes them to “deconstruct” the language of texts (including Scripture), redefining the words and reinterpreting the texts to mean whatever they feel as they have an encounter with the text’s language.

Although many aspects of modernism cannot blend with Christian faith, the correspondence theory of truth and referential theory of language harmonize with the presuppositions of Scripture. God intended real, objective meaning in the Bible. Scripture has no *real* value to us beyond subjective moments of “inspiration” if we do not believe its narratives and propositions connect with reality or that each author’s original intent is the ground and goal of our interpretation. Contemporary, biblical scholars who adopt these elements of “modern” epistemology, embracing the correspondence and referential theories and incorporating them into their hermeneutics, are not thereby embracing a wholesale adherence to all of the beliefs of secular modernism. Although Emerging Church leaders accuse [Evangelicals](#) of being culture-bound to modernism, Evangelicalism has in many ways been a countercultural movement rejecting, for example, modernism’s strict empiricism that disallows miracles or revelation. Only classic, theological liberals have accommodated modernism in all of its views.

Postmodern epistemology has serious practical consequences as it leaves no foundation for objective beliefs – a position called “postfoundationalism.” In spite of the ingenious efforts of skilled, postfoundationalist theologians to construct a theology that “has universal implications,” all postfoundational thought eventually succumbs to some form of skepticism or relativism. Thus, within postmodern thought no truth or morality can be “normative.” That is, no person or “scripture” can authoritatively tell postmoderns what is true or right for them. “Truth” and “morals” are found in the context of a specific community and they vary from one community to another.[9]

Thus, while generic “spirituality” is more acceptable to postmoderns than it has been to moderns (partly because the absolutist claims of science are losing ground everywhere but college science departments) any exclusive claim to revelation-based truth or morals is now thought to be arrogant and philosophically untenable. Postmoderns believe espousal of absolutes is an illegitimate attempt to manipulate others and exercise power over them. No one who embraces this epistemology has any room for others’ proclamation

of an ahistorical, [10] objective, universally authoritative meaning of a scriptural text.

It is not an oversimplification to say that postmodernism is hostile to the objective and exclusive claims of biblical Christianity. While Christians must be sensitive to the culture they find themselves in, and while we must contextualize our methods to reach those in that culture, we must never alter the Gospel itself to fit the prevalent worldview of any given culture. [11] Postmodernized Christianity is a seriously compromised “Christianity.”

I contend that the Emerging Church movement is guilty of this kind of compromise through embracing postmodern epistemology and accepting this epistemology’s practical implications. Emergents’ efforts to accommodate postmodernism by shaping theology to suit culture (as opposed to merely adapting methods to reach culture) have been every bit as disastrous as liberal scholars’ accommodation to modernism. This accommodation follows the removal of a theological foundation (an objective basis for faith) with the rejection of “bounded-set” theology (borders for orthodoxy). With no foundation or boundaries it becomes practically impossible to say what is or is not Christian truth or conduct as there are no objective definitions or limits to faith or practice. Culturally arbitrary opinions are all that remain. Any belief or standard may then be questioned or changed. In a postmodernized faith all beliefs are valid to those who hold them. Brian McLaren, for example, says

I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts ... rather than resolving the paradox via pronouncements on the eternal destiny of people more convinced by or loyal to other religions than ours, we simply move on ... To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus (while learning it better myself), I would gladly become one of them whoever they are, to whatever degree I can, to embrace them, to join them, to enter into their world without judgment but with saving love as mine has been entered by the Lord. [12]

Any thoughtful consideration of the removal of the foundation and the boundaries for Christian faith must conclude that this postmodernization is fatal to biblical faith, stripping the term “faith” of any real meaning and

opening the door to substantial change in fundamental beliefs. These changes can be found most prominently in the soteriology and eschatology of emergents. After they have undergone emergent accommodation to postmodernism, doctrines such as atonement and judgment no longer resemble the biblical teachings Evangelicals believe are non-negotiable. The collection of quotations from emergents found later in this article should give the reader an idea of the extent to which heresies have been entertained in the movement.

The effect of the emergent movement's presence in the body of Christ is equivalent to both an autoimmune disease (such as multiple sclerosis, in which the body attacks itself with harmful consequences) and an immunocompromising disease (such as AIDS, in which the body lowers its defenses to external pathogens). The Emerging Church movement acts like an autoimmune disease, stripping Christian terminology of its biblical meanings, and it acts like an immunocompromising disease, disarming the body's defenses against foreign invasion. The result is that this movement represents a deadly influence within the Church which requires a decisive response from those who recognize it as such.

While many participants in this movement such as Dan Kimball acknowledge that the terms "emergent" and "emerging" are essentially synonymous in popular understanding, and while many scholars such as D. A. Carson use them interchangeably, some participants in the movement see a distinction in meaning between the two. Mark Driscoll and many of the churches listed on the Acts 29 Network website (<http://www.acts29network.org/index.html>) consider themselves "emerging" but not "emergent" because they associate "emergent" with the more liberal and antinomian positions of Brian McLaren and Emergentvillage. This more conservative minority may be characterized by some but not all of the criticisms offered in this article. An even smaller minority of "emerging" bloggers consider the "emergent stream" too conservative and structured. [This paragraph was edited on Aug. 8, 2006]

Just as there is diversity in postmodernism at large there is diversity in the Emerging Church movement and there are many things within it that are in themselves good. To isolate the essence of emergent we will disregard the diverse elements they do not necessarily hold in common with each other. Emergents differ on many peripheral theological and practical issues. Thus, these issues do not help *define* the movement in spite of their being a real

part of the movement. We will also disregard those elements emergents do hold in common with Evangelicals outside of the movement. Emergents share many things with non-emergents such as a belief in contextualization, caring for the needy, friendship evangelism, and fellowship. Consequently, these commendable elements are not part of the *distinctive* essence of emergent regardless of the legitimate place they have in the movement. This leaves us with the distinctive teachings and goals elaborated below.

If we think of this distinctive essence of emergent as a lake, we can observe that some people, such as Brian McLaren, are swimming in its deepest spot, while others, such as Scott McKnight, are wading in the lake at a shallower depth. Still others (perhaps John Ortberg and Rick Warren fit this description), seem to enjoy boating on the lake and occasionally drinking its water, enjoying friendship with the movement while maintaining a distinctly Evangelical identity.

Emerging Church – Distinctive Teachings & Goals

- **The world is radically changing and the church must radically change with it**
Emergents believe postmodernity represents a dramatic break with the past and that only an extreme transformation in the church can keep the church relevant and effective in this environment. What is needed, they say, is not just a change in methodology. We need a new *kind* of Christian.
- **Since the Church has been culture bound for so long we must reexamine and question every belief and practice in the Church, finding new ways to define and express these**
Visiting emergent blogs, one will find that absolutely any doctrine or moral standard can be questioned. It seems at times that emergents are engaging in a complete reinvention of Christianity accompanied by a radical redefinition of Christian terms.
- **We have no foundation for any beliefs, therefore we cannot know absolute truth**
Critics of the Emerging Church movement insist that emergents misrepresent epistemological foundationalism (the belief that we do possess some knowledge that serves as a basis for further knowledge) as requiring “bombproof certainty,” something *contemporary* foundationalists insist they do not hold to. What contemporary foundationalists do believe is that we can possess real knowledge that

is so certain it requires extraordinary evidence to refute it. [13] D. A. Carson points out that emergent postfoundationalism is based upon yet another of their false antitheses, saying “In effect the antithesis demands that we be God, with all of God’s omniscience, or else forever be condemned to knowing nothing objective for sure.” [14] Additionally, emergents fail to consider the scriptural teaching of faith as something God-given which does possess supernaturally certain knowledge ([Mt 21:21](#), [Eph. 2:8](#), [Heb 11:1](#)). Emergents do not seem to realize that critiquing secular foundationalism is not the same as critiquing Evangelical foundationalism. In *A New Kind of Christian* McLaren’s fictional altar ego, Neo, says even Scripture is neither authoritative (in a “modern” sense) [15] nor a foundation for faith. [16]

- **Since we cannot know absolute truth, we can only experience what is “true” for our communities**

Postmodern philosophers and theologians insist that truth is only known and validated within communities (“There are no Metanarratives only local narratives”). While this implies that truth is culturally relative and that true cross-cultural communication is impossible (those outside a community must first join a community before they can understand the community’s ideas), postmodern authors communicate to people of various communities simultaneously, apparently expecting them to all equally understand their intent.

- **Since we cannot know absolute truth we cannot be dogmatic about doctrine**

Emergents see orthodoxy as “generous,” [17] that is, inclusive of many beliefs Christians have historically thought of as aberrant or heretical. Many leading emergents echo McLaren’s refusal to assert Christianity’s superiority to other world religions.

- **Since we cannot know absolute truth we cannot be dogmatic about moral standards**

Absolute stands on issues such as homosexuality are viewed as obsolete. Activities such as drinking, clubbing, watching sexually explicit movies, and using profanities are seen by some emergents as opportunities to show those who are not part of the Christian community that postmodern Christians do not think they are better than them through any false sense of moral superiority. [18]

- **Since we cannot know absolute truth, dogmatic preaching must give way to a dialogue between people of all beliefs**

Emerging Christians do not posture themselves before the world as though they were the light and the world were in darkness. Instead of “preaching” to the “lost” they join in “conversation,” with people of various beliefs. Conservative Evangelicals seem not to be truly welcome to contribute their distinctive content to this conversation since they represent the old, rotting corpse of “modernism.”

- **Since propositional truth is uncertain, spiritual feeling and social action make up the only reliable substance of Christianity**

Emergents consider propositional truth a “modern” (and thus outmoded) fascination. Postmoderns think and communicate in narratives. [19] Since the pursuit of truth is portrayed as a never ending journey with no solid starting point, they consider the only legitimate measuring rods of Christianity to be experience and good works. Without a solid footing in revealed truth, however, emergents have no firm foundation for knowing which experiences are valid and which works are good (something they do not seem to notice).

- **To capture a sacred feeling we should reconnect with ancient worship forms**

Trappings such as burning candles and events such as silent retreats are popular in the movement. Embracing these premodern forms further breaks their connection with “modern” Christianity.

- **Since sublime feeling is experienced through outward forms, we should utilize art forms in our worship**

Many participants in the movement see appreciating art for art’s sake as a spiritual experience.

- **Through conversation with them, “outsiders” will become part of our community, and then be able to understand and believe what we teach**

The postmodern approach is not to try to persuade people to believe, it is to try to befriend people into joining. This is commonly expressed as Robert Webber does when he says “People in a postmodern world are not persuaded to faith by reason as much as they are moved to faith by participation in God’s earthly community.” [20] There is a false antithesis in such statements, however. We do not have to choose between a purely cerebral attempt to talk others into believing correctly on the one hand and offering an open, unqualified invitation to our group on the other. The Bible teaches us to proclaim the gospel message with reliance upon the Holy Spirit to empower, illuminate, and convict ([1 Co 2](#), [1 Thess 1:9](#)). When such proclamation is absent, as it is in the Emerging Church movement, there is no prophetic voice

- coming from the church calling sinners to repent and believe the Gospel ([Ac 2:38](#), [16:30-32](#)).
- **All are welcome to join the “conversation” as long as they behave in a kind and open-minded manner.**
Emerging believers reject any posture which hints at exclusivism. Dogmatic Evangelicals, however, are not treated as kindly in the conversation as others are (something many emergents admit).
 - **The ultimate goal is to make the world a better place**
The Emerging Church movement envisions a utopia in which the oppressed of the world are free, the poor are no longer impoverished and the environment is clean. This paradise is achieved through social activism. Many emergent leaders think it is selfish folly to live for the return of Christ.

The accomplishing of all of the above is seen by those in the movement as evidence that the Church is emerging to reach the culture, adapting to it. Critics of the movement see these things as signs that the Church is submerging into the culture, being absorbed by it.

Footnotes

1. All Scripture references in this material are from the New American Standard Bible.
2. See David Dockery, "The Challenge of Postmodernism" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*. ed. David Dockery (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BridgePoint Books, 2001), 13. Dockery points out that from Schleiermacher to existentialism, there has been a progressive severing of faith from knowledge, reason, and morality. Consequently, I prefer Thomas Oden's term "ultramodernism" to "postmodernism," but will use the commonly accepted term.
3. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 21-22
4. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines epistemology as "the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity."
5. Modern thought is considered to have originated with the enlightenment.
6. Douglas Groothuis, "Truth Defined and Defended" in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. eds. Millard Erickson, Paul Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004), 65.
7. *Ibid.* 68
8. Justin Taylor, "An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book" in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical*

- Accommodation in Postmodern Times. eds. Millard Erickson, Paul Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004), 31.
9. As moral relativism has become an increasingly natural part of postmodernity, culture's collective conscience has become increasingly seared.
 10. "Ahistorical" refers to the timeless nature of truth. Believers in ahistorical truth maintain that $2+2=4$, for example, is the very same truth in the 21st century that it was in the first century. The authors of Scripture consistently presume this posture toward truth and postmoderns consistently reject it.
 11. Our object must be to communicate the timeless gospel message into the culture we address. Emergent methodology is to redefine traditional terms, enabling them to communicate to postmoderns a message which fits their presuppositions but which does not originate from God. When this is done, the effect is that rather than the Church evangelizing postmodern culture, postmodern culture has successfully converted the Church.
 12. Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2004) 260, 262, 264.
 13. See R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 107-140.
 14. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), 105.
 15. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 52.
 16. *Ibid.* 53. McLaren and others do sometimes claim a supreme place for Scripture in the Church. They do not, however, claim that Scripture should have this place because it is the objectively-true, revealed Word of God. Instead, they grant the Bible a revered status because of the place it holds in the Christian community.
 17. "Generous orthodoxy" is a term originally coined by Hans Frei that has been used by several emergent authors and popularized by Brian McLaren.
 18. A young woman on staff at an emergent church complained to me that she was made to feel she was a second rate Christian because she did not drink, use profanities, or watch questionable movies. While it is important for Christians to remember that in ourselves we are not better than others, it makes us practically indistinguishable from the world to deliberately engage in questionable activities to supposedly make a point. As my son Ryan says, "A day without sunshine is like night."
 19. Other than two of the more conservative "emerging" sites the only emergent website I have found with a statement of faith is Bill Dahl's *The Porpoise Diving Life*. It consists of a lengthy account of the story of his ministry, with the only propositional statement being "We believe God is alive." Dahl does not explain how he may have deconstructed the terms "believe," "God," and "alive." [\[This footnote was edited on Aug. 8, 2006\]](#)
 20. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 79.