

The Emerging Church—Part 2: Epistemology, Theology, and Ministry

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Having outlined a basic historical context from which to understand and evaluate current mutations taking place within the evangelical movement in the first article of this series, we now turn our attention to the “emerging church” movement itself.

Probably most people associate the “Emerging Church” label with a worship style fad. On July 8, 2005, a PBS Special Documentary defined the “Emerging Church” as “a growing movement that is rethinking what Christianity and the Church should look like in contemporary culture.”¹ The anchor, Bob Abernethy, went on to explain that the emerging church movement is about worship and doing church for the next generation in a changing culture.

However, as Evangelicalism, the emerging church is a complex and variegated movement that defies definition.² One reason for this is that “the churches that embrace this label are not monolithic. There are huge

¹ Bob Abernethy, “The Emerging Church, Part One,” PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/cover.html>.

² “The movement is a typically postmodern phenomenon—deliberately diverse, perplexingly amorphous, and constantly in flux. It has no clear homogeneity in doctrine, philosophy, or practice.” Phil Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity,” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson, and Ronald L. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 212.

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diversities in style, organization, theology, and ministry practice among emerging churches.”³ Recognizing this fact, I find Mark Liederbach’s and Alvin L. Reid’s description to be a useful approximation. According to them the Emerging Church movement is “a groundswell of laypersons, ministers, theologians, and churches who are influenced by, and are responding to real or perceived worldview shifts from modernity to postmodernity and who seek to make the Christian message relevant in the postmodern environment via shifts and adjustments in at least ministerial methodologies and usually theological/philosophical ideologies as well.”⁴

For the purpose of this article, I will use the “Emerging Church” label⁵ as an increasingly popular umbrella designation to identify a grass root movement arising from a variety of local churches and theologians within the Evangelical movement.⁶ They are wrestling with their mission in postmodern times, and converging in the task of rethinking their philosophical foundations, theology, ecclesiology, and ministry in the light of postmodernity.⁷ I use the “Emerging Church” label, then, to identify what Justin Taylor classifies as “postconservative” Evangelicalism. “The proponents of this perspective—however—have assumed various levels with varying connotations—postconservatives, reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists, postfoundationalists,

³ Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 23. See also, Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity,” 212.

⁴ Mark and Alvin L. Reid Liederbach, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshipers in an Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 36.

⁵ To gain some insights on the origin of this label see, Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emerging Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), xvii-xix.

⁶ One added complexity is the fact that participants and evaluators of the movement interpret the term “emerging church” in various ways. For instance, arguing that the umbrella designation “emerging church” includes two streams one friendly and another unfriendly to classical Evangelical doctrines Mark Devine the term “emerging church” to designate the whole movement and the term “emergent” to designate the stream unfriendly to Evangelical doctrines Mark Devine, “The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. and Adam W. Greenway Henard (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 7-9. Under this definition of the word “emerging,” what I call in this series of articles “Emerging Church” corresponds broadly to what Devine calls “emergent.”

⁷ For an introductory description of the Emerging Church, see, for instance, Liederbach, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshipers in an Emerging Culture*: 20.

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postevangelicals—but they all bear a family resemblance and can be grouped together as having a number of common characteristics.”⁸

As we proceed, then, we need to keep in mind that the emerging church is a conversation where some important issues and ideas converge. Our purpose is to underline some general trends among the great diversity of opinions, theologies, practices, understandings, and personal developments that characterize the emergent church conversation. We hope the descriptive analysis that follows, though necessarily incomplete and partial, may help us to answer the questions about the nature and extent of the changes the emerging church brings to Evangelicalism.

Complex movements have many interrelated causes. The Emerging Church is no exception.⁹ For instance, emergents feel like they are “postevangelicals.” Many of them were Evangelical culturally because they grew in evangelical homes and churches; yet, they do not feel evangelical theologically.¹⁰ As postmodernity snuck up and struck without warning it found young generations of Evangelicals disillusioned with Evangelicalism as they received it.¹¹ Awareness with postmodernity made them aware that their religious experience was cultural rather than theological or spiritual. Yet some recognize that this “awakening” brings up an “excellent set of questions but not a substantial set of answers.”¹² Most likely, many questions rise not from postmodernity but from the unfinished, pragmatic, fragmented, incomplete, nature of Evangelicalism itself and the confusion it generates in the mind of cultural Christians who want to become followers of Jesus in spirit and truth. This confusion has accelerated the post denominational, postevangelical, and postprotestant nature of the Emerging Church movement.

Some broad reaching issues catapulted its rapid ascendancy and acceptance in Evangelical circles. Among them we find, for instance, the

⁸ Taylor, “An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of this Book,” 17-18.

⁹ For a very good and comprehensive historical and sociological introduction to the emerging church phenomenon see, for instance, Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

¹⁰ Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*

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sense of inner dissatisfaction, mentioned above, about the present status of evangelical theology¹³ (persistent doctrinal divisions) and ministry (young evangelicals leaving the Church)¹⁴ combined with the “eureka” conviction of having found the key to overcome these issues by using new resources available in the supermarket of ancient traditions and postmodern culture.

Concerned with the rise of the Emerging Church movement,¹⁵ evangelical theologian Justin Taylor describes the leaders of the emerging church movement as “self-professed evangelicals seeking to revision the theology, renew the center, and transform the worshiping community of evangelicalism, cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live.”¹⁶

This indicates that the Emerging Church movement is not just about worship innovations. Instead, it seems to involve a major overhaul of Evangelical belief (theology), ecclesiological identity (renewing the center of the Evangelical movement), and practice of ministry (worshiping). Yet, most emerging leaders see themselves as engaged only in “a conversation about the church in the emerging culture.”¹⁷

Is the emerging church a “conversation” about the mission of Evangelicalism or a revisioning-renewing-reforming of its essence? To ascertain the nature and extent of change this sector of Evangelical leaders are advancing in the Evangelical community we need to consider, briefly, the ministerial paradigm, philosophical underpinnings, theological understanding, and ecclesiological direction, of the emerging Church.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 14.

¹⁴ Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 46.

¹⁵ The Emerging Church is a movement that permeates churches through leadership and grassroots initiatives. Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the most controversial and misunderstood movement in the church today,” *Christianity Today*, February, 2007.

¹⁶ Taylor, “An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of this Book,” 18.

¹⁷ Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture*, 26.

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Worship

It always helps to start with something with which we are familiar or can easily find and grasp. For this reason, we start with worship and ministry, the most visible aspects of the Emerging Church.¹⁸ Again, we need to bear in mind that since there is no single model of emerging church worship, what follows is only indicative of a broad emerging church liturgical mind set.¹⁹

On the surface, the emerging church worship reacts against the obvious weaknesses of the Charismatic and modernist seeker-sensitive worship styles of pragmatic neo-Evangelicalism. Instead, emerging worship attempts to strengthen their weakness and shortcomings to reach secular minded Christians and non-Christians. The answer they found to reach the new generations, however, involves the very foundations of Christianity with profound implications for liturgy and theology. This fact comes to view when we learn that the emerging church approach to worship “is really nothing new at all; in fact. It is simply going back to more of a raw and basic form of vintage Christianity.”²⁰ Having in mind that “vintage”²¹ means “something from the past of high quality, especially something representing the best of its kind” we may incorrectly assume the emerging church’s “going back” to the sources means going back to Scripture, the foundation of the Protestant Reformation. This is not the case; the going back means going back to Church tradition.

When emerging evangelicals worship, they are likely to use, for instance, all styles of music from heavy rock and roll to traditional hymns, ancient rituals, spiritual disciplines, Christian seasons, and, Jewish

¹⁸ A brief history of the Emerging Church may also help us to understand it. For an introduction to the brief history of the Emerging Church see, Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*: 30-39.

¹⁹ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

²¹ “Going back to a raw form of vintage Christianity, which unapologetically focuses on kingdom living by disciples of Jesus. A post-seeker-sensitive worship gathering promotes, rather than hides, full displays of spirituality (extended worship, religious symbols, liturgy, extensive prayer times, extensive use of Scripture and readings, etc.) so that people can experience and be transformed by the message of Jesus. This approach is done, however, with renewed life and is still ‘sensitive’ as clear instruction and regular explanation are given to help seekers understand theological terms and spiritual exercises.” *Ibid.*

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traditions. As part of the liturgy, they may move around the place of worship and engage in various rituals personally, including mystical practices, contemplative prayer, writing down prayers and thoughts, and, stations where they can paint or use other art forms to express their worship to God. Following the sacramental liturgical paradigm, worshipers see Christ in all rituals.²²

The center point of emerging worship is no longer Bible preaching²³ but the Eucharist. For some emerging leaders, “sermons” are optional;²⁴ others deemphasize, shorten, and heavily illustrate them with visuals and art forms. Multiple presenters replace the traditional single preacher. Besides, “preaching is no longer the authoritative transferring of Biblical information.”²⁵ Emergents prefer story telling. Emerging worship and spirituality, then, “emerge” from Ancient Roman Catholic liturgy,²⁶ eastern spirituality, contemporary Charismatic worship, and postmodern culture.²⁷

Spiritual disciplines and discipleship are central to emerging worship. “In the emerging church—explains Dan Kimball—our mission is evangelism, but evangelism includes making disciples. Becoming an apprentice of Jesus is the whole process of our sanctification. Sanctification is our spiritual formation as the Spirit of God shapes and forms us from the inside out.”²⁸ The spiritual disciplines are a “means” to discipleship. “The Holy Spirit is the one who changes, grows, and sanctifies us (Rom. 6-8).”²⁹ Through Him, we receive power and life from God’s kingdom. Dallas Willard explains in some detail how this actually takes place. Adopting

²² ———, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 95.

²³ This is not new. The Bible was not the center in Charismatic and Pragmatic worship paradigms already.

²⁴ Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations*, 87.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical+ charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 175.

²⁷ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*: 12.

²⁸ Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 214.

²⁹ Ibid., 216.

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Aquinas' anthropological views,³⁰ he believes that the soul is “the deepest level of life and power in the human being;”³¹ the life center that “correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self.”³² Because of our sinfulness, our souls require a constant flow of divine life and power to bring order to our beings. The spiritual disciplines are instrumental to bringing “the soul back to union with God”³³ in order to receive the flow of divine life and power in our souls.³⁴ In this way, we experience and receive the Kingdom of God. Through the spiritual disciplines, we become disciples in the Kingdom of God. Clearly, Spiritual Disciplines are a very important part of the “vintage” Christianity that emerging leaders retrieve from medieval Roman Catholic spirituality.³⁵

At first, I could not understand emerging Evangelicals embracing mystical spirituality and retrieving liturgical forms from Roman Catholicism. Obviously, they find Roman Catholic mysticism compatible with the Gospel. To understand why and how, we need to bear in mind that an epochal paradigm shift in worship and spirituality had already taken place in Evangelicalism. The Charismatic (Pentecostal-celebration) worship paradigm had replaced largely the Word (Biblical) paradigm of the Reformation. Moreover, the megachurch tradition of pragmatic evangelicals led by Bill Hybels and Rick Warren engaged in “church-within-a-church” youth ministry. Since 1986, they were adapting “the gospel” to the cultural needs of young generations (generational

³⁰ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 265-6, endnote 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

³² *Ibid.*, 199.

³³ *Ibid.*, 211.

³⁴ “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order. They enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself, as we ‘yield ourselves to God, as those that are alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God,’ as Romans 6:13 puts it.” *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁵ ———, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 156-92. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988), 15-76; Robert E. Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 199-218. Mark Husbands, and Jeffrey P. Greenman, ed. *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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approach).³⁶ Additionally, we need to bear in mind that because the Charismatic (Contemporary) and Sacramental (Ancient) liturgies operate on the same philosophical and theological basis, they see rituals mediating the presence of God to the worshiper. Thus, it seems that common philosophical assumptions are behind the emerging church's use of Roman Catholic ancient spiritual practices in private "spiritual disciplines" and public worship. Yet, most probably, the immediate cause for using them is pragmatic; they help to attract a wider postmodern audience craving to experience God directly.

For the untrained eye, emerging church worship styles appear to be innovations of Charismatic worship. However, according to emerging church leaders there is a significant mutation between Charismatic and Emergent worship styles regarding the foundational and controversial issue of God's presence in worship. "In Charismatic worship—explains Paul Roberts—God is located 'outside' the physical domain. This is why charismatic worship is so focused on ecstatic experience. By contrast, alternative [emerging] worship relocates God back within the physical domain, so to experience God means to encounter him in and through the created things around—symbolically, iconically, sacramentally."³⁷ By locating the presence of God "in" the physical domain, the Emerging Church indicates openness to modern and postmodern philosophical and theological panentheism.

According to Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, in Charismatic worship God's presence takes place in an ecstatic encounter, which they assume flows from the modernist separation between secular and sacred "spaces."³⁸

³⁶ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*: 30-31.

³⁷ Paul Roberts, *Alternative Worship in the Church of England* (Cambridge, U.K.: Grove Books, 1999), 18. See also, Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*, 73.

³⁸ "New paradigm churches (such as the Vineyard and Calvary Chapel) move away from 'the earth is the Lord's,' believing that material reality does not need to reflect spiritual reality, thereby, in essence, giving physical space over to secularization. For emerging churches, this 'Boomer' hostility toward the beautiful reinforces the sacred/secular split of modernity in that it venerates the written word, logic, and linearity and gives all other reality over to the 'world.' In contrast, emerging churches ask, can we not know God more fully from what we see around us in the worship space, just as we see glimpses of God in the goodness and beauty in daily life?" ———, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian*

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The embrace of postmodernism explored below becomes instrumental in their rejection of the modern distinction between the sacred and the secular.³⁹ The postmodern (non-modern) view is that all life is sacred. In other words, we could say that the secular has disappeared, only the sacred remains. The secular is now sacred, or more precisely, sacralized. We will deal with the powerful ontological assumptions and consequences of this view below. At this point, we should notice the important point Gibbs and Bolger make about the connection that exists between worship and ontology.

For worship, the sacralization of the world means that we should expect to find the real presence of God in the materiality of life and the world. Hence, worship forms may and should include anything from life, culture, or matter. Emerging leaders create their new liturgical forms convinced that they will find God in all material forms in nature and culture. Although there may be disagreements about the finer ontological details regarding the way in which God is present in the material realm of reality, the emerging church's conviction that God becomes present through matter coincides with the sacramental worship paradigm central to Roman Catholicism. At the same time, one could argue that the differences between the Charismatic and Sacramental paradigms are not qualitative but quantitative. Finally, and most importantly, we cannot fail to notice that the ontological convergence among Emerging, Roman Catholic, and Charismatic worship paradigms necessarily displace and make irrelevant the Word worship paradigm of the Protestant Reformation.

Postmodernity

Neo-evangelical seeker sensitive worship took culture seriously. Emerging church leaders are no exception. Not surprisingly, they found that something radically different was taking place in postmodern culture with profound consequences for worship and ministry. Postmodernism, then, plays a grounding role in the Emerging Church movement. Although it is true that from a historical perspective the Emerging Church "emerges" "out of the more traditional expression of the church . . . into a postmodern

Communities in Postmodern Cultures, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

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expression,”⁴⁰ we can say that from the perspective of its ground the Emerging Churches “emerges” out of postmodern culture into a postmodern version of Evangelicalism. Reactions and engagement with postmodern culture are different among Emergent leaders. Some recognize that “[t]aking postmodernity seriously requires that all church practices come into question.”⁴¹ For these reasons, we need to consider briefly the basic meaning of postmodernity and its epistemological, cultural, and theological dimensions.

For practical purposes, we will say that the word “Postmodernity” names the paradigm shift in the foundations of western philosophy and culture that became popular almost overnight by the end of the 1980’s.⁴² Evangelical church leaders became aware of the advent of postmodernity in 1995 with the publication of J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh’s *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be*.⁴³

According to the main theologian of the Emerging Church movement, Stanley Grenz, the postmodern consciousness includes a number of features. Among them, for instance, the abandonment of the inevitable progress of society idea, and the belief that the survival of humanity is now at stake. Postmodernity also values the social and communitarian

⁴⁰ Gary Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson, and Ronald L. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 274.

⁴¹ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*, 34.

⁴² Historians will discuss, I am sure, the history of the emergence of the foundational changes we are experiencing since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Arguably, we can trace the origins of postmodernity back to the origins of modern empiricism in the seventeenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is one precursor of postmodernity. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) are main expositors of the radical philosophical changes of postmodernity. For an introduction to postmodern philosophy in general and these authors in particular (excluding Gadamer), see for instance, Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

⁴³ J. Richard Middleton, and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995). C.f., Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*, 33.

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dimension of existence. Several characteristics relate to epistemology. To them we now turn our attention.⁴⁴

Epistemology

The word “Postmodernity” suggests the idea of leaving behind and overcoming Modernity. For postmodernist thinkers this leaving behind is closely related to epistemological issues. Epistemology is the philosophical discipline that studies the way in which human beings think in general and do science in particular. In this context, Grenz explains that while modern epistemology “linked truth with rationality and made reason and logical argumentation the sole arbiters of right belief,” postmodern epistemology questions human reason as “the sole determiner of what we should believe. Postmoderns look beyond reason to nonrational ways of knowing conferring heightened status on the emotions and intuition.”⁴⁵

In technical terms, this means a departure from the epistemological explanations of modern philosophers like Descartes, Hume, and Kant, bunched up under the label: “Foundationalism.”⁴⁶ Grenz explains “Foundationalism” as the search for absolute certainty. Modern philosophers started by establishing “a set of unquestionable beliefs or certain first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles are supposedly universal, context-free, and available—at least theoretically—to any rational

⁴⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴⁶ For a brief technical description of “Foundationalism” as a theory of justification (or origin) of our knowledge (statements or propositions) see, J. P. Moreland, and Garrett DeWeesse, “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 82-84.

person.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Foundationalism also includes “a realist metaphysics” and “the correspondence theory of truth.”⁴⁸

Surprisingly, besides the clear negative affirmation that philosophers have rejected Foundationalism (Neo-Positivism), I have found no clear philosophical exposition, much less explanation, of postmodern epistemological doctrine either by Stanley Grenz or Carl Raschke, the latter of which offers a nuanced, extended, philosophical perusal of several main “postmodern” philosophers and who forcefully advances the need for the postmodern reformation of Evangelicalism.⁴⁹ One reason for this situation may be the fact that both Grenz and Raschke deal with epistemology from the regional perspective of the philosophy of language.⁵⁰ Instead, we should understand modern epistemology as the beginning of a departure and

⁴⁷ Stanley Grenz, and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30. Stanley Grenz probably derives this view from Scottish philosophers like Thomas Reid (1710-1796), see *ibid.*, 32. And, Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 28-29. This description of modernist epistemology, however, does not reflect mainline Modernist philosophers in at least two points. First, modern epistemology does not seek to establish beliefs or principles but the source from which scientific information flows. Second, they propose widely different sources of scientific data. For instance, while Descartes suggested the innate ideas in the soul, Hume advanced the impressions of sensory perception in the mind. The innate ideas for Descartes and sensory perception for Hume were the foundations for two very different interpretations of the origin and nature of scientific knowledge (epistemology). I think the point Grenz is trying to make relates more to the implicit notion of “objectivity” both brought to the table. Yet, they inherited this assumption for the classical theory of knowledge created precisely by “vintage” philosophers, the same philosophers behind “vintage” Christianity espoused by Evangelical postmodernists. In short, leading modern philosophers did not espouse foundationalism as Grenz describes it.

⁴⁸ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 32. Actually, what Grenz and others call Foundationalism relates closely to Neo-positivism, a philosophy that attempts to explain the way in which the new empirical-scientific knowledge works. According to Grenz, cognizant of the “shortcomings” of modern foundationalist epistemology some philosophers sought a “cogent” alternative to modern foundationalist epistemology. These include Coherentism, Pragmatism, and the “linguistic turn” with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) philosophy of language. *Ibid.*, 38-42.

⁴⁹ Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 48-68;77-92.

⁵⁰ For a brief outline of a more inclusive approach, see for instance, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Truth and Contemporary Culture,” in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 55-56.

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reinterpretation of both the epistemology and ontology of classical philosophy stemming from Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle.

In practical terms, we learn that postmodernity is about the end of absolute universal reason that supposedly emerged during the Enlightenment. This means, “There is no single, universal set of criteria by means of which we can judge definitively the epistemic status of all beliefs.”⁵¹ The end of reason affects truth, metanarratives, and textual communication. “Truth is no longer considered to be universal in scope, but rather relative and subjective.”⁵² In other words, truth is not absolute but relative. About metanarratives, we learn that “comprehensive accounts of truth, meaning, and existence, equally binding for everyone, are cast aside.”⁵³ In short, broad all-inclusive explanations of reality such as the theory of evolution and metaphysics are not universal but relative to the understanding of the individual person. Finally, regarding textual communication postmodernism affirms that no text, including the text of Scripture, “can claim absolute authority or command universal acceptance.”⁵⁴ Universal textual communication is impossible.

If these views are valid, one wonders why postmodernity is universally accepted. Why do some Evangelical theologians feel compelled to revise everything? Why should believers in Argentina become postmodernists? More importantly, if truth is regional and culturally conditioned, visible Christian unity becomes impossible. To avoid total fragmentation postmodernism needs to provide a new foundation for truth.

The End of Foundationalism?

Is a nonfoundationalist theology possible? The answer to this question is yes, and no, depending on the meaning we give to Nonfoundationalism. Advocates of Nonfoundationalism reject the Foundationalist theory that

⁵¹ Stanley J. Grenz, “Articulating The Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 120.

⁵² Andreas Köstenberger, J., “Introduction,” in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 13. Cf. Mohler, Jr., “Truth and Contemporary Culture,” 58-59.

⁵³ Köstenberger, “Introduction,” 13. Cf. Mohler, Jr., “Truth and Contemporary Culture,” 59-60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

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there is an “objective” foundation of truth independent from the knowing subject, and replace it by embracing the “web” theory that truth has a “logic” foundation in the inner coherence of the part of a system of beliefs.⁵⁵ Implicitly, then, Nonfoundationalists assume the existence of the knowing subject who identifies or creates the web of beliefs.

Moreover, with postmodernism Nonfoundationalists also assume that “all knowers are conditioned by their background, culture, setting, and many other factors.”⁵⁶ If knowledge springs from historically conditioned knowers, then, “in theory every person’s truth might be different from that of every other person, resulting in subjectivism.”⁵⁷ To avoid subjectivism, postmodernism appeals to the community to establish “the norms of truths within its own bounds.”⁵⁸

Embracing the postmodern turn to community, in a very nuanced and slick way, Grenz reverses the Protestant turn to Scripture back to tradition. Nonfoundationalism, then, “names the web of practiced Christian belief faithful to the norms shaped by its ecclesial life.”⁵⁹ Yet, to insinuate any supernatural origin for the web of beliefs would violate the essence of Nonfoundationalism reverting to Foundationalism. “For the philosophers, an appeal to the revelational authority of a religious tradition would constitute a foundationalism that warranted reasoning could not abide.”⁶⁰ Philosophically, then, any supernatural experience in Church tradition becomes a new expression of Foundationalism. In other words, to fit the Nonfoundationalist philosophical requirements traditions should be secular. If the tradition involves supernatural elements, it will fall back into Foundationalism and no longer fit epistemological Nonfoundationalism. Yet, because in the Emerging Church the epistemological foundation is no

⁵⁵ For an introduction to the Web or Coherentist theory of truth justification see, for instance, Keith Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge, Dimensions of Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 97 and ff.

⁵⁶ Millard J. Erickson, “On Flying in Theological Fog,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 340.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 87.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

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longer religious experience or Scripture, but the community of believers, we will label its hybrid position Nonfoundationalist-Foundationalism.⁶¹

Before exploring the Emerging Church's return to tradition as an epistemological foundation, we need to consider briefly the reason behind this move. Is the advent of postmodern philosophy and culture the real cause behind "vintage" Christianity? I suggest an important contributing factor behind the Emerging Church movement may be the growing conviction among Evangelical leaders that they do not need to fight against modernity at all. Obviously, this conviction involves a radical departure from more than a century of Evangelical theology, practice, and apologetics against modernity. Probably, Emerging Church leaders may be the embodiment of the "Great Evangelical Disaster" about which Francis Schaeffer spoke in 1984. In turn, for Emerging Church leaders the "Great Evangelical Disaster" is the way in which the Old Princeton Theologians, Fundamentalism, and Neo-Evangelicalism related to Modernity. This is what they fight under the philosophical umbrella label of Fundamentalism and, in my opinion, is one reason why they see an important ally in Nonfoundationalist and postmodern epistemologies.

One wonders what is the mortal sin postmodern Evangelicals see in Fundamentalism. Not surprisingly, the mortal sin of Fundamentalism is an epistemological transgression, the inerrancy of Scripture, which in their view has far-reaching negative implications for Evangelicalism. Carl Raschke explains the transgression was to extend the inerrancy of Scripture, which all Christians assume in matters of salvation, to all matters.⁶² According to Raschke, the 'extension' of biblical inerrancy from salvation to everything originated with Charles Hodge,⁶³ and "amounts to

⁶¹ For the use of this designation to label Grenz's view, see for instance, D. A. Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's *Renewing the Center*," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 53. See also, Erickson, "On Flying in Theological Fog," 345.

⁶² Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 126.

⁶³ "Inspiration extends to all the contents of these several books. It is not confined to moral and religious truths, but extends to the statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical. It is not confined to those facts the importance of which is obvious, or which are involved in matters of doctrine. It extends to everything which any sacred writer asserts to be true." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Oak Harbor,

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the most subtle metaphysics.”⁶⁴ Clearly, Raschke’s own metaphysical assumptions prevent him from accepting Hodge’s ‘extension.’ He believes that “the ‘revealed’ word can in no way be put into the same epistemological box as our consensual, or commonsense, experience of the everyday world.”⁶⁵ Apparently, the “spiritual” order of salvation and the “secular” order of everyday experience belong to two different ontological dimensions. Scripture does not illumine everyday experience because salvation belongs to a different ontological level.

Now we turn our attention to Grenz’s proposal for the Nonfoundationalist-Foundationalist epistemology⁶⁶ of the Emerging Church movement. Grenz asks, “In what sense, or to what extent, can the theological task incorporate a nonfoundationalist epistemology?”⁶⁷ More precisely, “Does theological reflection and construction build on something

WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 1: 163.

⁶⁴ Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 127. I wish I knew what Raschke is implying here. Is he suggesting Hodge is subtly introducing a radical change in Christian metaphysics?

⁶⁵ Ibid. Here Raschke introduces his own ontological assumptions that prevent him from placing Christ and salvation on the same ontological level with everyday life. Perhaps, he uncritically assumes traditional Neoplatonic and Aristotelic ontological presuppositions regarding the reality of God and human beings that lead him, in company with Christian tradition, to separate the experience of salvation from everyday life.

⁶⁶ This contradiction begs explanation. Actually, it requires a better understanding of the epistemological problem unleashed by modern empiricists and the epistemology of modern sciences that Nonfoundationalism assumes. Grenz gets around this obvious continuation of Foundationalism by speaking about “affirming a (Non) Foundation.” Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 46. He seems to believe that he affirms a foundation that is not a foundation. This seems to mean that the foundation he proposes is of a different kind, namely, a non-cognitive foundation for epistemology, namely, tradition-experience. Maybe this is what Raschke has in mind when he comments that the idea that postmodern epistemology relativizes everything is a “most common caricature.” Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 17. Be it as it may, it seems that Grenz and Emerging leaders are reluctant to let Scripture be the epistemological foundation for Christian theology. At the bottom, I think, Grenz is adjusting to philosophical and scientific patterns that have no room for cognitive revelation in rational discourse. In doing that, the postmodernity of the Emerging Church is still very much modernistic in essence. However, a true postmodern approach to philosophy should recognize and make room for supernatural cognitive revelations as sources of knowledge.

⁶⁷ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 46.

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that we must presuppose?”⁶⁸ Grenz and the Emerging Church embrace the “communitarian turn”⁶⁹ advanced by non-Foundationalist reformed philosophers like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga.⁷⁰ They believe the postmodern hermeneutical paradigm points to the community as the foundation grounding a common but not universal basis for unity and agreement between rational individuals. In other words, society rather than reason or supernatural revelation dictates the categories for judgment and truth.⁷¹

What community is the non-foundation foundation of Christian theology? “The community that gathers around Jesus the Christ”⁷² is the foundation of theology. Nevertheless, the community requires its own constituting foundation. According to Grenz, the grounding center of the church is the personal “encounter with God in Christ,”⁷³ of each member of the community. He describes this encounter as an “identity-producing event” that generates an “identity-constituting narrative.”⁷⁴ Grenz does not specify the nature of this event. However, the experience he has in mind must be very similar to the universal religious experience of Modern theology because he correctly anticipates that readers will tend to confuse what he is saying with Schleiermacher’s “liberal” foundationalism.

Grenz submits two differences between the liberal and his own view of the Christian encounter. First, while liberalism speaks of a single universal experience common to all religions that expresses itself the same in diverse cultural ways, his non-foundationalist foundationalism believes that each religion springs from a different kind of experience. As indicated earlier, the Christian encounter with God takes place through Jesus Christ. This

⁶⁸ Ibid, 47.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 48. See also Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 213.

⁷⁰ Cf. Carson criticism of Grenz’s community based non-foundationalist foundationalism by way of Plantinga’s “kind of nonfoundationalist’s foundationalism.” Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*, 53.

⁷¹ For a postmodern analysis of tradition as the ground for reason, see for instance, Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁷² Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 48.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

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seems to indicate that the experience in itself is Christian. Second, while in the liberal model experience precedes interpretation, in Grenz's view interpretation precedes and facilitates experience. In fact, experience does not take place in a vacuum but in the context of a tradition that provides the "interpretive framework" necessary to "filter" and "facilitate" the experience. The interpretive framework is theological in nature, consisting in an "interpretation of the world in connection with the divine reality around which that tradition focuses,"⁷⁵ which in the case of Christianity is inherent to the proclamation of the Gospel.

It is worth noticing that Grenz does not elucidate the content of the experience at the ground of the Christian community. The fact that for him theology interprets experience suggests he is speaking as modern theologians of a non-cognitive encounter. Be that as it may, theology does not come from the encounter, but from the community. Moreover, theology is "an intellectual enterprise by and for the Christian community." The Church "seeks to understand, clarify, and delineate its interpretive framework informed by the narrative of God's actions on behalf of all creation as revealed in the Bible."⁷⁶ The "interpretive framework" the church produces is not "biblical" in the sense of being derived from exegesis but is "informed by" and "arises from" the "narrative of God's actions" in Scripture. Likewise, the theology the church produces does not spring from Scripture, as in Fundamentalist and Neo-Evangelical theologies, but from the interplay of a plurality of sources: Scripture, tradition, and the wider historical-cultural context.⁷⁷ Grenz and Emerging Church leaders are doing theology following the post-liberal playbook as described by David Tracy.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Grenz, "Articulating The Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," 124-29. C.f. Kwabena Donkor, "Postconservatism: A Third World Perspective" in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 203-06.

⁷⁸ In 1988 David Tracy advanced the notion that theology should work with two sources: Christian texts (Scripture and tradition) and common human experience and language (wider historical-cultural context). David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 43-45.

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Grenz recognizes that the “interpretive framework” the Church produces is “basic” for theology, and then in some sense foundational.⁷⁹ Yet, he is quick to add that in another sense it is not, because the “interpretive framework” does not precede the theological task but arises from it.⁸⁰ This is the reason why, “the systematic articulation of the Christian interpretive framework takes the form of an integrated statement of Christian doctrine.”⁸¹

Clearly, Grenz follows the coherentist theological method Wolfhart Pannenberg pioneered which belongs to the modernist history of tradition’s school. The structural difference between Grenz’s view of theological methodology and Schleiermacher are minor. The differences with traditional evangelical conservative methodology he labels “foundationalist” amount to a paradigm shift. In short, Theology has a new non-foundationalist foundation: the theological tradition of the Christian Church. In the process, Grenz displaced Scripture from providing the data from which to build the edifice of Christian theology. In short, theology is no longer “the systematic compilation of the doctrinal teachings of Scripture”⁸² but “the believing community reflection on its faith.”⁸³

By changing the foundation of Evangelical theology from Scripture to Tradition, Emerging Church leaders seek atonement for its mortal transgression—the claim Scripture provides the facts for Christian theology, doctrines, and theology.⁸⁴ Evidently, the new foundation brings

⁷⁹ “As the intellectual engagement with what is ‘basic,’ theology is a second-order enterprise, and in this sense theological statements constitute second-order language.” Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 49.

⁸⁰ “The theologians’ task, then, is not to work from an interpretive framework to a theological construct. Instead, the theological enterprise consists in setting forth in a systematic manner a properly Christian interpretive framework as informed by the Bible for the sake of the Church’s mission in the contemporary context.” *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Erickson, “On Flying in Theological Fog,” 340.

⁸³ Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 81, 85, 87, 88-89, quoted in *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 50-51. “[T]he postmodernist revolution in philosophy—as opposed to the general usage of the term ‘postmodernism’ in contemporary culture—has tendered an environment where the Christian gospel can at last be disentangled from the centuries-long, modernist gnarl of scientism, rationalism, secularism, humanism, and skepticism.” Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 20-21.

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the Emergent Church's theological method back to the Roman Catholic playground.

By way of summary, we can say that the Emerging Church movement adapts Christianity to postmodern thinking. According to Stanley Grenz, the evangelical embrace of faulty modern epistemology⁸⁵ led to evangelical fundamentalism, and liberal and conservative divisions across denominations.⁸⁶ To overcome them, evangelicals should embrace postmodern epistemology. In practice, this implies surrendering all absolutes (philosophical and biblical) and, embracing Christian tradition and postmodern culture as the new grounds on which the Christian church stands. Unlike the Protestant Reformation, the emerging Church Reformation⁸⁷ emerges not from Scripture but from Christian tradition.

Culture

Postmodernity involves more than epistemology. "The bottom line is that postmodernism . . . is simply a descriptor or locator of the Zeitgeist. The spirit of the times, for better or for worse."⁸⁸ While postmodern epistemology challenges theologians, postmodern culture challenges pastors. Dan Kimball puts it well:

While many of us have been preparing sermons and keeping busy with the internal affairs of our churches, something alarming has been happening on the outside. What once was a Christian nation with a Judeo-Christian worldview is quickly becoming a post-Christian, unchurched, unreached Nation. . . . New generations are arising all around us without any Christian influence. So we must rethink virtually everything we are doing in our ministries.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*, 25-26.

⁸⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 86 and ff; 326-31.

⁸⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 17.

⁸⁸ Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 20.

⁸⁹ Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 13-14.

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In cultural terms, then, postmodernism labels Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Epistemological and technological changes have produced substantial changes in the cultural mind frame of young generations.

Postmodern culture is the socialization and generalization of early twenty-century existentialism.⁹⁰ Some of its dominant characteristics are, for instance, secularism, subjectivism,⁹¹ relativism,⁹² pluralism,⁹³ inclusivism,⁹⁴ deconstruction, contradictory thinking,⁹⁵ suspicion of authorities,⁹⁶ historical thinking,⁹⁷ and, the primacy of experience over facts.⁹⁸

According to Gilley some of the things postmodern culture is not seeking in Christianity are systematic theology, apologetics, “church-lite,” consumer spirituality, pastors exercising kingly power, and, Broadway style worship. Instead, they expect to find spiritual mystery and an experience and feeling of the supernatural. The postmodern generation wants the transcendent.⁹⁹

⁹⁰ See for instance, Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 271.

⁹¹ Anecdotal experience replaces objective truth, see for instance, *ibid.*

⁹² “To the premodernist, truth was found in revelation. To the modernist, truth can be found in reason and science. To the postmodernist, truth is not found (indeed it is not capable of being found); it is created. Absolute truth is fable. . . it is not possible to find universal truth that is applicable to all people.” *Ibid.*, 270.

⁹³ “Self-determined pluralistic view of culture and religion. Conflicting truths and beliefs are accepted.” Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 44.

⁹⁴ “If nobody is right, then, everybody is right. This is the logical conclusion of the postmodern view.” Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 279.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270-74; *ibid.*

⁹⁶ “Power and faith are in personal experience away from Kings, Church, and Reason. . . . The Bible is open to many interpretations and is but one of many religious writings.” Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 44.

⁹⁷ See for instance, *ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁹⁹ “They are interested in religious experience and feeling. They want sense of the supernatural. They are not interested in systematic theology, tightly woven apologetic argument, or logical reasoning. But they are attracted to spiritual mystery. The Bay Busters and Mosaics are tired of ‘church-lit,’ consumer spirituality, church buildings that look like warehouses or malls, CEO pastors, educational programs structure like community colleges, and church services that are reminiscent of a Broadway musical. They want the transcendent.” Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 276.

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Aware of these profound cultural changes, Emerging Church leaders seek ministerial and worship methodologies that might attract the secular and the believer, the churched and the unchurched. To meet the search for an encounter with the mysterious, transcendent, and supernatural reality of God they are retrieving spiritual practices from Church tradition thereby fitting perfectly with Stanley Grenz's non-Foundationalist-Foundationalist Coherentist methodology discussed earlier.

When the relativism of the Postmodern Coherentist epistemology mixes with postmodern culture, Christianity becomes a mere cultural phenomenon without any objective knowledge revealed by God himself. This view of culture leads to a wholesale surrender of Christians doctrines and practices fitting well with the deep cultural adaptation missiologists describe as levels of C5 and C6 contextualization.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, at the C5 level, participants in the community "see themselves as postmoderns that are Christians [rather] than Christians living in a postmodern milieu;"¹⁰¹ at the C-6 level, they form secret underground communities that abstain from most of the activities, attitudes, doctrines and traditions of Christianity.¹⁰²

In total acquiescence of the dumb God of modernity, Emerging Church leaders are more than willing to become God's voice to humans. They claim they stand on the objective ground of God through religious experience, now labeled "spirituality." Assuming this ground, Leonard Sweet argues that change, however, must come from leaders "in tune with the ongoing mysterious, miraculous powers of divine creation."¹⁰³ Some emerging leaders with more "objective" leanings retrieve spiritual and liturgical practices from "vintage Christianity" (Christian Roman Catholic Tradition). Following an "ancient future methodology of movement, the affirmation of the past can become an acceptance of the future"¹⁰⁴ but it can

¹⁰⁰ John Travis, "The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum: A Practical look for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context," *Evangelical Missions* 34, no. 4 (1998): 407-08.

¹⁰¹ Ed Stetzer, "The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. and Adam W. Greenway Henard (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 83.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ ———, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), xix.

never become God's personal objective linguistic utterance about the past or the future. Is there a grounding role left for Scripture in the Emerging Church movement?

The Eclipse of Scripture

We already know that the Emerging Church movement stands on the plurality of theological sources of revelation and, therefore, does not believe in the *sola Scriptura* principle. Specifically, they react strongly against the conservative view of Scripture present in American Evangelicalism at least since Charles Hodge according to which Scripture is "above all the source for religious teachings."¹⁰⁵ What is the place and role of Scripture in the Emerging Church movement? What is the status of Scripture after deconstructionism and the rise of historical reason? For Evangelicals this is a crucial question in view of the Emerging Church's embrace of postmodernist epistemology.

Since the non-foundationalist foundation fitting postmodern criteria is the Church as community, we must read the Bible "first of all, and above all in the Church."¹⁰⁶ To read Scripture in the Church means "theology ought to assist. . . the community of Christ in reading canonical scripture as text."¹⁰⁷ More specifically, "the Christian tradition in general occasions the context for our reading of the Bible."¹⁰⁸ Decisive to the Emerging Church's understanding of Scripture is not the question of revelation and inspiration but the question of authority. To know what is the role and authority of Scripture according to the Emerging Church non-foundationalist foundation we should go to tradition.

Selectively drawing from tradition, Grenz believes that the "Protestant principle" is the authority of Scripture that consists in "the Holy Spirit speaking in Scriptures."¹⁰⁹ Yet, soon we learn that Scripture is not the place where the Holy Spirit speaks to us but the means by which He addresses us. Thus, "the Protestant principle means the Bible is authoritative in that it is

¹⁰⁵ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ More specifically, "[b]ringing scripture and Spirit together provides the foundation for understanding in what sense the Bible is the norming norm in theology and, in turn, stands as the essential prerequisite for reading the Bible as text." *Ibid.*, 65.

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the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks.”¹¹⁰ The Spirit speaks to us not “in” Scripture, as the Westminster Confession Grenz quotes declares, but “through” Scripture.

As Scripture, the authority of the Bible does not relate to its teachings in the Old and New Testaments, but to its “message” about God’s salvific actions for us.¹¹¹ The message is the norming norm for theology.¹¹² The “message,” however, is not what Scripture says but what the Spirit declares to us personally through His “appropriation” of the text. Although the authority of Scripture relates to its textual meanings, Grenz remind us that there is no exact correspondence between the revelation of God and the Bible.¹¹³ The Spirit’s address to us, then, “is not bound up simply and totally with the text’s supposed internal meaning.”¹¹⁴ The Spirit’s address always involves a “more than the text” communication. However, what more does the Spirit do? By appropriating the biblical text as the instrumentality of divine speaking, the Spirit creates a community of renewed persons.¹¹⁵

The role of Scripture in the Spirit’s creation of the Christian community is to mediate a “specifically Christian ‘interpretive framework.’”¹¹⁶ More specifically, “by leading us to view life in the present through the lenses of a biblically based interpretive framework, the Spirit

¹¹⁰ Ibid. “Taking the idea a step further, the authority of the Bible is in the end the authority of the Spirit whose instrumentality it is. As Christians, we acknowledge the Bible as scripture in that the sovereign Spirit has bound authoritative, divine speaking to this text. We believe that the Spirit has chosen, now chooses, and will continue to choose to speak with authority through the biblical texts.” Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹¹² Ibid., 72.

¹¹³ “These various attempts to engage the revelation behind the text provide a crucial reminder to us as we seek to understand how the biblical message is the norming norm of theology. Specifically this approach stands as a warning against positing a simple one-to-one correspondence between the revelation of God and the Bible, that is, between the Word of God and the words of Scripture. . . We might conclude that ultimately ‘the word of God’ is both Christologically and pneumatologically focused. In this sense, it is the Holy Spirit announcing the good news about Jesus Christ, which word the church speaks in the Spirit’s power and by the Spirit’s authority, and which is thereby connected to Christ himself.” Ibid., 70-71.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

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creates in the present a foretaste of the future, eschatological world and constitutes us as the eschatological people who serve as a sign point to the eschatological community.”¹¹⁷ Because the Spirit uses the Bible to create an interpretive framework in the community, the community that transmits the interpretive framework becomes the foundation for the interpretation of Scripture and Christian experience. We can see that, according to Grenz, authority does not reside in the Scriptures as text but through the Spirit as it rests in the community. “We read the text cognizant that we are the contemporary embodiment of a centuries-long interpretive tradition within the Christian community (and hence we must take seriously the theological tradition of the church).”¹¹⁸

Finally, we need to realize that according to Grenz, the Spirit does not speak what the letters of Scripture say,¹¹⁹ but by his actual voice, he speaks Christ. Grenz explains, “We listen to the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word [the spiritual Christ] through the word [letters of Scripture] within the particularity of the hearers’ context, and who thereby can speak in all things, albeit always according to the Word who is Christ.”¹²⁰

In short, Grenz, and with him the Emerging Church, implicitly embraces the Neo-Orthodox view of revelation¹²¹ and adopts a sacramental/functional view of Scripture where the text as a totality becomes the vehicle through which God mediates the exercise of his creative power. Theology as a biblically based interpretative framework

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁹ A. B. Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Post Conservatism’s Use of Language Games and Speech Act Theory,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 153-55.

¹²⁰ Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 211.

¹²¹ Grenz’ theological language betrays his liberal modernistic leanings. Consider for instance his adjudication of Jesus’ words “God is Spirit” not to Jesus but to the “faith community.” Referring to Jesus’ statement “God is Spirit,” he asks: “What actually does the faith community mean in affirming ‘God is Spirit?’” ———, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 82. The Emerging Church has a modernistic view of Scripture. Emerging leaders assume the neo-orthodox view (which fits the traditional interpretation and use of Scripture of the Roman Catholic Church). By the use of inherency McLaren “is dusting off the neo-orthodox view of the Scripture, which taught that the Bible contains the ‘word of God’ but is not the completed Word of God, for God’s Word can be found in anything he ‘inspires.’” Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 289.

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logically and chronologically precedes the understanding of Scripture and Christian experience. Scripture has authority not because of the words of God but because of the creative work the Holy Spirit performs through the words. Moreover, tradition is the interpretative framework for understanding Scripture and Christian experience.

The eclipse of scripture by tradition becomes clearer when we consider the use of Scripture in the practice of ministry and worship. According to Emerging Church spirituality, the spiritual meaning of Scripture is not “cognitive.” It does not spring from the understanding of the words of Scripture but from direct contact with the Word of God (Christ). In short, Scripture’s nature and function is iconographic,¹²² or sacramental. God speaks to us in Scripture not cognitively within the horizon of our everyday life, but spiritually within the horizon of His own life. Scripture is an icon, a window to the life of God (spiritual experience with God).

That the proper understanding of the cognitive contents of Scripture is not necessary to communicate with God becomes clear when Mulholland unpacks the nature of the spiritual reading of Scripture, central to the Spiritual Formation programs emerging in Evangelical seminaries. “We tend to think of spiritual reading first of all as reading the scripture, and this is sound. But if you have some acquaintance with Christian literature, you know the writings of the great mothers and fathers of Christian spirituality can become sources for spiritual reading. Poems, novels, plays can also become spiritual reading, because all of these human vehicles can become channels for the action of God’s presence, purpose, and power to penetrate our own lives.”¹²³

Scripture is human and not necessary for experiencing the divine presence and power. Any secular media will do. Unquestionably, the “iconic” sacramental view of scripture fits well the modernist view of Scripture and divine revelation. Norman Geisler expresses it plainly, “the new evangelical view of the Bible is neither new nor evangelical. It is not new, since to the degree that it deviates from the historical evangelical view, it adopts older forms of liberalism or neo-orthodoxy. And it is not orthodox, since it denies the historical orthodox view that the Bible is the

¹²² M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 69.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

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verbally inspired and factually inerrant Word of God.”¹²⁴ This being the case, we should notice the emerging church’s use of Scripture fits well with classical (ancient-future) teachings. In some structural sense, classical and modern thought patterns and theologies belong together and the Emerging Church is making the most out of their convergence.

The Emerging Church view of Scripture, then, embraces the paradigmatic shift expressed in the modern view that human beings are the authors of Scripture’s contents and worlds away from the historical Protestant view that God is the author of the cognitive and linguistic contents of Scripture.¹²⁵

Theology

According to Phil Johnson, in the Emerging Church Movement doctrinal diversity is so vast that to understand it we may need “to have as many categories as there are persons who identify with the movement.”¹²⁶ Others recognize various possible ways to do postmodern theology, among them, for instance, theologians pursue deconstructive, revisionist constructive, and restorationist models.¹²⁷ All the models aim at overcoming the scientism of modernity. The “deconstructive” model is critical and therefore represents more an identifiable face than a revisionist constructive proposal.¹²⁸ The “constructive” model is revisionist and seeks to reconstruct theology based on Process Philosophy’s neoclassical

¹²⁴ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*: 1: 408.

¹²⁵ “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.” Westminster Confession, 1: 4.

¹²⁶ Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity.”

¹²⁷ David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1989), 3 and ff.

¹²⁸ For samples of deconstructive approaches see for instance, Mark C. Taylor, *Erring, A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984). Carl A. Raschke, *The Alchemy of the Word: Language and the End of Theology* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979); Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). And, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987).

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metaphysics.¹²⁹ This is the path McLaren has followed so far. The “restorationist” model is conservative and follows the same general pattern of the “revisionist-constructive” model but using Aristotelic-Thomist metaphysics.¹³⁰ This is the path followed by Stanley Grenz’s “communitarian turn” and the “vintage” Christianity adopted in the areas of spirituality and worship as indicated above.

In pastoral ministry, there are different ways to relate to postmodernity, the relevant, the reconstructionists, and the revisionists.¹³¹ The relevant method accepts “the historic gospel but seeks to communicate it relevantly to the postmodern culture. The reconstructionists, . . . retain the same gospel but are creating more radical forms of church expressions—such as house churches, and the revisionists, . . . deconstruct and reconstruct both the church and the gospel.”¹³²

Emergents value practice more than theology. “For those in the Emergent Church practice is often considered a first order spiritual matter while doctrine is second order.”¹³³ At least, “they often come across sounding as though right practice trumps right belief.”¹³⁴

Emergents are ambivalent about theology. On the one hand, they value doctrines little because they tend to be unsatisfied with their theological experiences. On the other hand, they value theology because they need to understand what they believe. The Emerging Church is a movement in

¹²⁹ For a representative of this model, see for instance, David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹³⁰ For an example of postmodern Roman Catholic restorationism, see for instance, George William Rutler, *Beyond Modernity: Reflections of a Post-Modern Catholic* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987).

¹³¹ Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective,” 70-72.

¹³² Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 274-75; emphasis provided. “Some of the more conservative adherents, such as Mark Driscoll and, to some degree, Dan Kimball, would distinguish between emerging churches that would retain and promote many orthodox theological truths while adopting practices and methodologies they believe reach the postmodern generation, and emergent figures such as Brian McLaren, Spencer Burke, Rob Bell, and Steve Chalke, who call into question or simply deny cardinal doctrines.” *Ibid.*, 274.

¹³³ Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective,” 61.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

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search of a theology.¹³⁵ Consequently, they want a theological reformation.¹³⁶ The postmodern search for “intelligent”¹³⁷ spirituality, imagination, and mystery replaces the modern need for apologetics.¹³⁸ Intelligent means “people no longer have to choose between having a meaningful faith and being fully empirical and reasonable.”¹³⁹ Clearly, at its core, postmodernity is the embodiment and fulfillment of modernity.

The theological reflection of the Emerging Church is diverse,¹⁴⁰ mostly in a deconstructive face, and in need of construction.¹⁴¹ So far, emerging thinking is doctrinally relativistic and pluralistic. Doctrinally, Emerging

¹³⁵ “I see Emergent as a movement of postevangelicals in search of a theology. . . . These young leaders are church planters. Pastors, sometime-activists and serious Christian people but not academic theologians. They do know they are not satisfied with the theology they were given growing up or in evangelical seminaries. So they have gone hunting for something new: meeting with the likes of Miroslav Volf, Walter Brueggemann, Stanley Hauwerwas, Nancy Murphy and N.T. Wright—the sorts of figures, main line churches have hailed for years. As a journalist I see more overlap between main line and evangelical than is often thought.” Jason Byassee, “Emerging from What, Going Where? Emerging Churches and Ancient Christianity,” in *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future*, ed. Mark Husbands, and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 250.

¹³⁶ Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 280-81.

¹³⁷ “However, this does not mean or at least should not mean the complete loss of reason. Reason has a place in story. It is Christian rationalism that has failed, not intelligent discourse. So there is no need to be afraid of story. Story is neither irrational nor relativistic. Spirituality is about God’s story—how God reunites us to God’s own purposes for our life in this world and the world to come.” Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life*, 17.

¹³⁸ Presuppositional apologetics is part of modernity, according to Webber. “But we no longer live in the modern world that privileges reason, science, and the empirical method of proving this or that to be true. Some bemoan the shift from the modern world. Some even hang onto the modern world because their theology is dependent on it. For them, the thought of thinking differently is threatening, so they do not want to go there. But in the postmodern world, the way of knowing has changed. We now live in a world in which people have lost interest in argument and have taken to story, imagination, mystery, ambiguity, and vision.” Ibid.

¹³⁹ Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity,” 212.

¹⁴¹ “Before the emergent church leaders have even finished, all the essential teachings of the Bible have been deconstructed, redefined, or dismissed. And what has been put in their place? Oddly, but consistent with postmodern thinking, mostly mystery and questions.” Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 278-79.

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thought and practice are eclectic in the sense of deriving ideas from a broad and diverse range of sources without any organizing principle. McLaren, however, hopes one day to be able to overcome theological relativism and pluralism.¹⁴² Maybe the way back to tradition Grenz outlined will help the Emerging Church to overcome relativism, pluralism, and eclecticism as they move closer to Rome. The price to pay, however, is high: the official abandonment of the *sola Scriptura* principle and its corollary, the end of the biblical Reformation.

Not surprisingly, Stanley Grenz provides perhaps the most developed theological reflection to date by a leading representative of the Emerging Church movement. Still his theological overview in “Theology for the Community of God” is still an introduction in need of further development and clarification. At times, his writings show eclecticism and even apparent contradictions, like for instance, when he on the one side shows overtures to panentheistic thinking,¹⁴³ while on the other shows commitment to the traditional view of Creation.¹⁴⁴ In a theology grounded on tradition, one

¹⁴² McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical+ charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*, 286-87.

¹⁴³ “The God we know is immanent and transcendent. He is that reality who is present and active within the world process. Yet he is not simply to be equated with it, for he is at the same time self-sufficient and ‘beyond’ the universe. In conceiving of God, therefore, we dare neither place him so far beyond the world that he cannot enter into relationship with his creatures nor collapse him so thoroughly into the world process that he cannot stand over the creation which he made.” Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 81. Furthermore, Grenz seems to endorse Hegel’s pantheism as paradigmatic for Christianity. “According to Hegel—he wrote—, all processes in nature and history form a unified whole which is the activity of God. Through them the divine reality takes on objective form and comes to full awareness of itself. This occurs particularly in human artistic, religious, and philosophical creativity. According to Hegel these are the self-manifestation of the divine Spirit. Hence, God comes to self-awareness through the world process, especially through the human consciousness of God. In this sense, God is ‘absolute Spirit.’ And human beings in turn are relative spirit.” Ibid., 82. However, Grenz stops short of endorsing Hegel’s pantheism up front. One wonders, however, why would he describe pantheism in such detail without explaining its essential conflict with Biblical teachings. Further study in his later works may help to determine whether he was advancing not only a “communitarian turn” but also a “panentheistic turn” in evangelical theology.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 109-12.

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wonders what could become the criteria to evaluate and choose from contradictory traditions. Facing the same problem Thomas Aquinas knew he could not rely on tradition to provide a unified interpretation of Scripture or Christian doctrines. Instead he used his own reinterpretation of Aristotelic ontology and metaphysics as the guiding light showing the way out of the many contradictions he found in the fathers of the church. Would postmodern emerging church theological eclecticism triumph or would it turn back for guidance to some form of Aristotelic-Thomistic or panentheistic ontology and metaphysics?

The kingdom of God is an important teaching in the Emerging Church. According to Gibbs, emergents challenge the church paradigm to do ministry with the Jesus of the New Testament Kingdom paradigm.¹⁴⁵ The “Kingdom Paradigm” means “[t]he gospel of emerging churches is not confined to personal salvation. It is social transformation arising from the presence and permeation of the reign of Christ. The gospel of the kingdom is prominent throughout the four Gospels. Emerging churches are no longer satisfied with a reductionistic, individualized, and privatized message.”¹⁴⁶

The Gospel includes the social transformation caused by “the presence and permeation of the reign of Christ.” Clearly, emergents are challenging the traditional forensic understanding of justification by faith. The stakes are high. Furthermore, pastorally, “[t]he idea of a kingdom focus instead of a church focus is a huge paradigm shift, one that does not come easy,”¹⁴⁷ and challenges even the recent seekers and purpose driven ministerial paradigms.¹⁴⁸ Emerging leaders are retrieving the gospel of the Kingdom of God Christ preached in the Gospels.¹⁴⁹ So, what is the Kingdom of God?

By interpreting the biblical teachings of the “kingdom of God” with theological and philosophical presuppositions, Dallas Willard puts into

¹⁴⁵ N. T. Wright’s views on Jesus and the Kingdom are influential in Emerging Church circles; for a brief summary of N. T. Wright’s views, see for instance, Guy Prentiss Waters, “It’s ‘Wright,’ But is it Right? An Assessment and Engagement of an ‘Emerging’ Rereading of the Ministry of Jesus,” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson, and Ronald L. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 190-93.

¹⁴⁶ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures*, 63.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

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practice Stanley Grenz's theological method described earlier. From this perspective, Willard explains that the "kingdom" or "rule" of God is "the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom."¹⁵⁰ More precisely, God's kingdom consists in the eternal kind of life available to us through Christ's word and presence. "That is Jesus' Gospel."¹⁵¹ Clearly, "the kingdom of God is not essentially a social or political reality at all." The kingdom is God's own eternal life, ultimate reality. We enter and participate in the kingdom through spirituality and worship.¹⁵² As mentioned above, Willard's notion of God and the spiritual disciplines assumes Thomistic Aristotelian philosophical categories. Again, we see Emerging Church theology standing not on Scripture alone but on the plurality of theological sources.

In the area of Christian missions, this theological understanding opens the door for persons of all religions to "inhabit" the kingdom. The reason for this view is that the ontological nature of the kingdom is not historical or cultural but spiritual. Consequently, individuals from different religious cultures can belong to the kingdom just by accepting Jesus' spiritual life and power. For instance, any cultural Buddhist, Muslim, or Jew can belong to the kingdom of God just by accepting Christ's spiritual life by faith, in other words, by becoming "followers of Jesus." The label "Followers of Jesus" names any person connected to Christ's spiritual life and rule

¹⁵⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 25.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁵² For the relation between the Kingdom of God and Spiritual disciplines turn to page 17.

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without involving cultural changes.¹⁵³ In missiological terms this embraces any expression of Christianity at levels C-5 and C-6.¹⁵⁴

For the Emerging Church, then, the Kingdom of God is the kingdom of the spirit resulting from God's presence and life, or in Grenz's language from the creative work of the Holy Spirit, transforming from within the human soul without changing religious cultures. This paradigm challenges seriously the uniqueness of Christ and Christianity which modern and postmodern theologies are too willing to concede according to the dictates of postmodern epistemological relativism and pluralism.

In summary, as emerging Christians interpret Scripture from the hermeneutical perspective of postmodern culture and patristic-medieval Church traditions,¹⁵⁵ they unavoidably embrace theological pluralism and relativism.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, the emerging movement does not "have an airtight system or statement of faith."¹⁵⁷ As of yet, the emerging theological project of the Emerging Church movement promotes overall Christian unity. As Generous Orthodoxy,¹⁵⁸ it includes most traditional teachings and practices as they "emerged" throughout Christian history. What are its ecclesiological implications?

¹⁵³ This is the reason why, for instance, McLaren can say, "Although I don't hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus." McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical+ charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*, 264.

¹⁵⁴ For the definition of what the C-5 and C-6 communities are see, Travis, "The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum: A Practical look for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context."

¹⁵⁵ Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*: 214-15; 315.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 346-51.

¹⁵⁷ McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today."

¹⁵⁸ See, for instance, McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical+ charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*.

Ecumenism

The ecumenical heritages of Evangelical denominationalism, the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Evangelical Fellowship, the Charismatic movement, together with recent Roman Catholic Ecumenism, seem to fit well with postmodern relativism and culture. By arguing that there is no universal absolute truth, postmodernism intellectually grounds the broadly enhanced view that doctrinal and religious controversies are ultimately foolish and fruitless. Not surprisingly, the Emerging Church movement shows deeply rooted ecumenical leanings. For instance, by embracing the epistemological and cultural levels of postmodernity, the Emerging Church is ecumenical in nature, method, and heart. The postmodern way, then, is the ecumenical way of what some emerging church leaders are calling a “Generous Orthodoxy,” that is an all-inclusive approach to Christian doctrines and theology.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, by embracing the ancient-future method, some reconstructive postmodernist leaders are ecumenical in a methodological way that places them squarely on the road back to Rome. While the first fosters ecumenism culturally and embraces theological eclecticism, the latter promotes ecumenism methodologically and grounds ancient-future worship and spiritual practices. While dialog works in the ecumenical project from the top down (from the institution to the laity), the emerging church ecumenical conviction and practices work in the same ecumenical project from the bottom up (from the laity to the institution).

The Emerging Church’s “turn to tradition” becomes acceptable in large measure due to the fact that the leading Reformers “perceived themselves as sharing in the continuing communion with the ‘holy and catholic and apostolic church’ as true Catholics, and that catholicity did not depend on allegiance to the bishop of Rome.”¹⁶⁰ Moreover, among others, Stanley Grenz convincingly shows that the evangelical movement and the Protestant reformation are ecumenical in nature. Moreover, they have

¹⁵⁹ See for instance, Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christians Communities in Postmodern Cultures*: 38-39. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical+ charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*.

¹⁶⁰ D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 179.

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played a leading role as a renewal “force” in the “one,” “apostolic,” “catholic,” and “holy” Christian Church.¹⁶¹ By returning to their roots, emerging evangelicals aim at becoming the leading center of American evangelicalism. Implicitly, they dream to become the renewal force in Christian ecumenism as well.¹⁶²

Although leading Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten (1929-) is not associated with the Emerging Church movement he shares its ecumenical vision. In fact, he has formulated a well-articulated proposal for advancing ecumenism along the same lines embraced by Grenz and the Emerging Church Movement.¹⁶³ His proposal, however, explicitly seeks “full communion among catholic, orthodox, and evangelical communities in the East and West.”¹⁶⁴ Braaten’s ecumenical vision springs from the correct assessment of the origins of the Protestant Reformation—Grenz and the Emerging Church also share—according to which, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley did not intend “to start a Bible church without catholic substance”¹⁶⁵ as many Evangelicals assume. Instead, they intended to reform the tyrannical government of the Church.¹⁶⁶ They intended “to restore the ancient catholicity of the church.”¹⁶⁷

Thus, the Reformation never was about reforming Roman Catholic theology or philosophy. Renewal ecumenism stands on the always-present broad theological agreement between Protestantism and Roman Catholic theologies. For instance, they share the same beliefs in the trinity, Christ, the Holy Spirit. They have in common “the same ecumenical creeds and sacred liturgies; the same sacraments of baptism and holy communion; the same dominically instituted office of the holy ministry; and the same genealogies of apostles, martyrs, missionaries, saints, hymns writers; and doctors of the church.”¹⁶⁸ Above all, they have the same sacrament grounding the same one, holy, apostolic, catholic, Church. “What defines

¹⁶¹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 325.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 350-51.

¹⁶³ Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 21.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants*, 201.

¹⁶⁸ Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*, 145.

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the church is the living presence incarnate in the eucharist, where Christ and his community are bodily one. The church is Christ as his bodily presence in the world, prefiguring the future of the world in the kingdom of God.”¹⁶⁹

Moreover, Braaten points out that since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has changed.¹⁷⁰ Consequently, the reason for an independent Reform movement has ceased to exist. Braaten goes on to argue that we cannot be sure Luther himself would initiate a Reform movement within Catholicism under the present circumstances.¹⁷¹ “In the light of all these changes—Braaten concludes—is there anything that could still justify a continued protest of the ‘protestant principle’ in a separate ecclesiastical order? The answer is: Not if The Reformation call has been heard and heeded by Rome!”¹⁷²

Knowing there is still much resistance against Roman Catholicism among evangelical leaders he invites the rest of us to reflect on our relation to Roman Catholicism. Are we justified in continuing our separation?¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁰ Roman Catholic understanding of Luther’s work and Reformation has also changed during the twentieth century, see for instance, *ibid.*, 14-16.

¹⁷¹ “We cannot be sure that Luther, were he living within the conditions of present-day Catholicism, would sound his call to reform in the same uncompromising fashion, especially if he knew that his Reformation would turn out so many kinds of Protestants. If Luther had our historical hindsight, he would see a Protestantism enduring a number of transformations—an orthodoxy equally as scholastic in method as the one he rebelled against; a pietism breeding the same Schwärmerei as the leftwing reformers; a rationalism which numbed the voice of preaching; a romanticism that drowned theology in a nature mysticism; a liberalism that pictured Jesus as a social worker; a fundamentalism that always fought the fight of faith in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong methods’ plus all the later variations of a neoorthodoxy, neofundamentalism, and neoliberalism.” *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷² Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 29.

¹⁷³ “The Roman Catholic Church holds out an open invitation to return at any time. Many Protestants are so insecure in their independent existence that they feel insulted by the invitation. They feel psychologically threatened. They would rather be left alone. They tend to view the Reformation not as a movement for the sake of the Roman Catholic Church but as a new departure, the beginning of a new Christianity that leaps over the centuries back into the primitive church and Bible times. Evangelical Lutherans who make their protest for the sake of the catholicity of the church cannot do that. We must seriously ask today whether our continued separation is justified, and we must answer that question honestly, without rationalizing. . . . The justification for a continued separation must have theological and not

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“‘Are we at the end of the Protestant era?’ Is there still a need for Protestantism as an independent movement, or could it be incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church, working as the leaven of reform within the church?’”¹⁷⁴

Braaten’s proposal is clear, direct and to the point. His questions are fair. We can see how sacramental theology unites Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Emerging Church leaders. Does it unite also all Evangelicals? Only time will tell. The Emerging Church vintage worship practices fit well with its postmodern and ancient-future ecumenical strategies. They in turn harmonize well with the Roman Catholic’s Vatican II ecumenical master plan.

Conclusions

From the brief and partial description of some points in the short but complex history and experience of the Emerging Church phenomenon, we can reach some tentative conclusions. They might help us to frame the larger question about the nature and extension of the changes currently experienced by American Evangelicalism and Christianity at large.

The Emerging Church is emerging from tradition and culture as a reform of neo-Evangelical American Protestantism. Unlike the Protestant Reformation that evolved outside of the walls of the Roman Catholic Church, the Emerging Church movement is evolving inside the walls of Evangelical denominations.

The Emerging Church movement is in its early stages of development. Its full theological and ministerial shape is still in the future.

The Emerging Church movement has inherited the fragmentariness of Protestant Christianity but is seriously committed to overcoming it by engaging in ecumenical theology, ministry, and ecclesiology.

Not only Luther and Calvin but also Emerging Church theologians and ministers develop their theological system using Roman Catholic ontological and metaphysical foundations. These principles provide the hermeneutical foundations for both Evangelical and Emerging Church theologies and ministries.

psychological reasons.” Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*: 18.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 19.

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Radically departing from the American Evangelical tradition the Emerging Church does not see the teachings of Modern philosophy and science as presenting serious challenges to its understanding of Scripture and Christianity.

In the absence of simple answers to modern scientific and philosophical challenges to Scripture, Emerging Church leaders are choosing to follow the example of their Liberal Evangelical predecessors who had progressively accommodated Bible interpretations and teachings to the dictates of science and popular culture in the areas of theology, doctrines, ministry, and worship. In short, the Emergent Church is bringing to full realization the adoption of a modernistic neo-Orthodox view of Scripture and the corresponding secularization of worship, music, and liturgy.¹⁷⁵

Thus, unlike neo-Evangelicalism the Emerging Church's embrace of modernity and postmodernity preempts the need to face them with Apologetics. This approach assumes that science and religion deal with different yet compatible components of reality and experience.

The Emerging Church is explicitly challenging the theological center and leadership of the American Evangelical coalition. In so doing, it is further fracturing the already fragmented theological and ecclesiological existence of Protestantism. The leadership of the Evangelical coalition and the future of the Protestant Reformation are at stake.

After the two initial centuries when it gradually emerged from Scripture, Protestantism confronted challenges from science and culture for the next three centuries. Seemingly, during the twentieth century the ground of the Protestant Reformation had been progressively switching from Scripture to philosophy and culture. Early in the twenty-first century, the Emerging Church is embracing fully the liberal Protestant turn back from Scripture to philosophy and culture.

In the first article of this series we asked the overall question about the extent and nature of the changes taking place in the Emerging Church movement. We asked whether the Emerging Church movement represents a minor evolutionary mutation in the history of Evangelicalism or the emergence of a new macro evolutionary form.

¹⁷⁵ Adam W. Greenway, "Conclusion," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. and Adam W. Greenway Henard (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009).

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Due to its strong philosophical commitments, grass roots engagement, and simultaneous origination, the Emerging Church movement does not seem to be a passing fad. Instead, it appears to be a new stage in the historical and theological development of American Evangelicalism. However, as we will see in the next article, several leading Evangelicals do not agree with this assessment.¹⁷⁶

Some questions remain, then, why should we consider a very short-lived and fragmented movement to have epoch-making characteristics? And, more importantly, is the Emerging Church's turn to philosophy and culture an indication that the Protestant Reformation's emergence from Scripture is over?

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¹⁷⁶ "The passing of time will sort out whether Emergent will be remembered as a passing theological fad (what many of its critics think) or rather as something more transformative and longstanding in the body of Christ (what most of its sympathizers hope)," *ibid.*, 336.