

The Emerging Church–Part 3: Evangelical Evaluations

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Due to the sheer epochal nature of the changes western culture and Christianity are experiencing at the beginning of the twenty first century, Evangelicals cannot avoid asking not only the meaning of what Phyllis Tickle calls “The Great Emergence,” but also “where is it going and where is it taking them as it goes.”¹ In order to assess how this overall phenomenon relates to the evolution of Evangelicalism, in this series of articles I am attempting to assess, in broad lines, the nature and extent of the changes American Evangelicalism is experiencing at the beginning of the twenty first century. In order to envision the direction in which Evangelicalism may be evolving, it is important to factor the initial reaction of Evangelicals to the Emerging Church movement.

Because the changes facing Evangelicalism affect the actual religious experience of all believers, reaction to postmodernity and engagement with the emerging church movement was unavoidable. Reactions to challenges can widely vary in persons and movements. Allan Stucky reminds us that “[d]ifferent people react to such radical changes in different ways. Some quickly adapt while others fight to keep their world the same at all costs. Some find themselves in the middle, cautiously seeking to understand their new world but weighing it against where they’ve been before. And just like people, different churches and denominations have different reactions to a

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 13.

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world that seems to be changing around them incessantly.”² Consequently, Ken Howard’s call for cool heads and open minds to prevail in this experience is wise and timely.³ Fortunately, most reactions to the emerging church that I have found are, kind, Christian and even sympathetic.⁴

After briefly summarizing the theological history of the Evangelical movement in America (first article) and drawing a working outline of the emerging church movement (second article), in this article we turn our attention to some initial critical evaluations by Evangelicals to the Emerging Church movement. Necessarily, the sketch that follows will be an incomplete sample of a much broader and complex reality. We will focus on the very same issues raised by the Emerging Church Movement described above: Worship, postmodernity, epistemology, Nonfoundationalist-Foundationalism, culture, Scripture, theology and ecumenism.

Since my approach in this series is historico-theological rather than historico-sociological⁵ I have chosen to evaluate reactions from the center of Evangelicalism.⁶

² Alan Stucky, “Anabaptism and Emergence: Collision or Convergence,” *Dialogue* 39, no. 1 (2010): 19-20.

³ Ken Howard, “A New Middle Way? Surviving and Thriving in the Coming Religious Realignment,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (2010): 105-06.

⁴ Consider, for instance, John Bolt’s assessment of D. A. Carson’s sympathetic evaluation. “As I noted above, Carson is not unsympathetic to many of ECM’s concerns. He praises its concern to know its social and intellectual context and to aggressively evangelize in a contemporary mode. He also notes its concern to reconnect with historic, particularly early, church tradition. Then, in a telling anecdote (55-56), he draws a portrait of a church that looks for all the world like a typical emergent church, only to disclose that he is in fact speaking of Tim Keller’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, a church significantly different from ECM in its unapologetic Reformed confessional identity—a quite un-postmodern characteristic. What is Carson’s point? Redeemer *displays all the strengths of the emergent church movement while avoiding most of its weaknesses* (Carson’s emphasis). ECM is definitely ‘on to something’ (56) but, according to Carson, it does have weaknesses.” John Bolt, “An Emerging Critique of the Postmodern, Evangelical Church: A Review Essay,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (2006): 207.

⁵ For an excellent evaluation of the Emerging Church from the historico-sociological perspective see, for instance, Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*.

⁶ I am focusing on essays presented in the following works, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor, ed. *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004); Gary L. W.

Worship

Although the Emerging Church Movement arguably revolves around worship, I was surprised to find almost no critical theological evaluation to the Emerging Church's worship and spirituality views in the few publications I consulted.⁷ Instead, I found some passing positive comments in the area of ecclesiology.⁸ Perhaps the most obvious reason for this absence is that I did not do a thorough enough literary review of existing sources. Other scholars may have evaluated the worship patterns in the Emerging Church. However, this situation might also indicate that a leading group of Evangelical scholars led by renowned theologian Millard Erickson⁹ basically agree with the Emerging Church Movement in this most important issue. This suspicion seems validated by the group of Evangelical scholars led by William Henard and Adam Greenway.¹⁰ The latter group provides a critical but sympathetic evaluation of the Emerging Church movement, but generally distinguishing between two streams within the Emerging Church movement, a stream hostile to Evangelical doctrines (Emergent) and another stream friendly to Evangelical doctrines (Emerging) is challenging.¹¹ They find laudable the Emerging Church's openness to

Johnson, and Ronald L. Gleason, ed. *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008). William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009).

⁷Erickson, *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. Andreas Köstenberger, ed. *Whatever Happened to Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005). Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*. Johnson, *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*.

⁸For instance, "In the area of worship, the emphases on art and beauty and the desire to experience God's transcendence are commendable." John Hammett, "The Church According to the Emergent/Emerging Church," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 258.

⁹This group reports its findings in, Erickson, *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*.

¹⁰This group reports its findings in, Henard, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*.

¹¹Devine, "The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams," 7-9. Ed Stetzer enlarges this taxonomy by suggesting three branches, Relevants, Reconstructionists, and, Revisionists. The Relevants are a continuation of the "contemporary worship" of the 80's and 90's. The Relevants are the same but challenge church structures. The Revisionists challenges the doctrines and theology of the Evangelicals. Stetzer, "The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective," 72. Interestingly, Stetzer who writes and evaluates

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Church tradition and its spiritual and liturgical forms that the Emerging Church in general exhibits.¹² The evaluators I have surveyed seem to have no qualms with Emerging Church spirituality and worship styles.

However, Jim Shaddix, from a homiletical perspective, takes issue with what he perceives to be a central weakness in the Emerging Church liturgical paradigm. He challenges its “blatant redefinition of preaching” with sound biblical evidence and arguments. Emerging Church preaching demonstrates there is a vanishing and mutation from simply proclaiming and explaining the Word of God into a “progressive conversation” in which Scripture is merely one of the participants.¹³ In other words, “as opposed to being the sole authority for faith and practice, the Bible is merely one contributor sitting around the table—alongside experience and collective wisdom—‘as an authoritative member of the community’.”¹⁴ Yet, from solid biblical evidence he shows that “when it comes to the issue of discovering and communicating spiritual truth, preachers in the Bible saw their responsibility simply to teach propositionally what God had revealed and persuade their listeners to act on it.”¹⁵

Then Shaddix moves on to challenge the central tenet on which this theory in the Emerging Church stands, the notion that the essence of Christian spirituality does not involves knowledge and education.¹⁶ He

an article on the Emerging Church in Henard’s volume is himself an Emerging Church leader friendly to Evangelical doctrine, Devine, “The Emerging Church: One Movement–Two Streams,” 8. This strengthens my suspicion that Evangelical leadership do not challenge but acquiesce or embrace the spirituality and worship advanced by the Emerging Church Movement.

¹² Devine concludes his evaluation of the Emerging Church, “One very hopeful and potentially self-correcting feature observable among many of the leaders across the entire spectrum of the movement is the declared openness to the whole Christian tradition, the desire to learn from the witness of the body of Christ extended in both time and space. They wish to avoid a lapse into one theological ghetto or another that would threaten to shut them off from fellowship with other Christians and destroy the unity of Christ that must concern all Bible-loving believers.” ———, “The Emerging Church: One Movement–Two Streams,” 40.

¹³ Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone: The Emerging Church a New Reformation or an End-Time Deception* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007).

¹⁴ Jim Shaddix, “To Preach or Not to Preach: An Evangelical Response to the Emergent Homiletic,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

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challenges this position by showing “Scripture’s emphasis on the essential nature of knowledge and understanding for spiritual development.”¹⁷ On this basis he concludes that when preaching the primary task of ministers “is not to give opinions, indirect implications, extra-biblical principles, or even inspiration for mutual dialogue but instead reveal the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning in Scripture so that people’s minds are exposed to supernatural truth.”¹⁸

Finally, Shaddix challenges Emerging Church and Evangelical pastors against the tendency of relying on methods of communication rather than the supernatural message itself. Paul himself exemplified the principle according to which method should not rise above or overshadow the message. This usually takes place in Emerging Church and Evangelical worship because preachers are convinced they will reach postmodern audiences by using methods “like progressional dialogue, conversational speech, relational presentations, visual imagery, contemplative atmospheres, and other components that appeal to the postmodern mind.”¹⁹ Instead he claims, “some methods of presentation can actually overshadow the message because of their emotional nature or other qualities that bypass understanding and appeal to other aspects of people’s flesh.”²⁰ Instead the sermon should make the message clear to the mind and heart of the believer.

Shaddix’s emphasis in preaching from Scripture and through understanding reaching the mind of the believer as an essential component of Christian spirituality directly contradicts the dynamics of mystic spirituality the Emerging Church retrieves from church tradition. This point is clear to many lay Evangelicals. Although not representing a scholarly opinion, I found a lay ministry strongly opposed to the new spirituality and worship advanced by the Emerging Church.²¹ The presence of these views may signal the existence of spirited opposition at the grass roots level of the Evangelical movement to both the spirituality of Christian tradition and the Emerging Church where the rubber meets the road. Time will tell how extended and influential such sentiments might be. If this is the case, Evangelicals could be divided on this pivotal issue.

¹⁷Ibid., 289-90.

¹⁸Ibid., 293.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 304.

²¹This group reports its findings in, Henard, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*.

Postmodernity

There is no clear single conservative view of what postmodernity is and represents for Evangelicalism. Evangelical scholars are aware of the postmodern spirit of the times and favor engagement rather than isolation. However, Douglas Groothuis describes the spirit of American postmodernism by correctly comparing it with the Sophists of old. Protagoras' spirit, he affirms, "is reincarnated (with a few twists) in a host of postmodernist thinkers."²² Not surprisingly, then, conservative Evangelicals have a more critical and nuanced approach to postmodernity and reject the way of philosophical and theological accommodation favored by the Emerging Church Movement. A few scholars challenge the Emerging Church's accommodation to postmodern relativism by engaging it at a general philosophical level thereby opening possible alternate ways to relate to postmodernity. Some options are revelational, metaphysical, and transmodern.

The revelational alternative stands on the conviction that postmodern criticism of scientific metanarrative does not apply to religious narratives. Expanding on James K. A. Smith's analysis, Kwabena Donkor observes correctly that Scripture makes universal claims to truth "not on the basis of some kind of *universal reason*, but on the basis of faith."²³ Consequently, Evangelicals do not need to shy away from claiming the divine revelation and inspiration of Scripture as the foundation of their beliefs and worldview. If this view is correct, then, postmodernism may require an adjustment of Christian Apologetics and ministerial methods but not a reinterpretation of Christian belief by adopting the Emerging Church's communitarian nonfoundationalist/foundationalist turn.

The metaphysical alternative stands on the conviction that the way to overcome postmodern relativism and affirm universal truth²⁴ is not by way

²²Shaddix, "To Preach or not to Preach: An Evangelical Response to the Emergent Homiletic," 304.

²³Douglas Groothuis, "Truth Defined and Defended" 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), 70. C.f. Donkor, "Postconservatism: A Third World Perspective," 214.

²⁴"My own view is the direct opposite of Rasche's. I shall not engage his argument in any detail but only suggest that in fact evangelical theology has been insufficiently metaphysical instead of too much so. The accusations laid against so-called evangelical rationalism—too much philosophy; not enough relationality based on mystery and faith—are precisely the Achilles' heel of the postmodern enthusiasts." James K. A. Smith, "A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited," *Faith and*

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of divine revelation but by way of a “revitalized classical theological metaphysics.”²⁵ John Bolt makes this claim directly contradicting Carl Raschke’s call to *dehellenize* the evangelical faith.²⁶ Apparently feeling comfortable with the general patterns of Greek thought, Bolt claims that Metaphysics rather than Scripture²⁷ will continue to provide the foundation for Evangelical universal claims to truth. In calling for a metaphysical foundation to overcome postmodernity, Bolt follows the Roman Catholic way to “overcome” postmodern thinking,²⁸ and agrees with the turn to tradition of the Emerging Church Movement.

The transmodern alternative stands on the possibility that postmodernism is on its way out and being replaced by a “transmodern” synthesis²⁹ of classical, modern, and postmodern ideas that include the objectivity and universality of truth.³⁰ James Parker III concludes, “While

Philosophy 18, no. 3 (2001): 355.

²⁵John Bolt, “*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?,” 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), 92.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 89. C.f., *ibid.*, 91.

²⁷Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 131-40.

²⁸As Bolt, John Paul II calls “... for a philosophy of *genuinely metaphysical* range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth... Here I do not mean to speak of metaphysics in the sense of a specific school or a particular historical current of thought. I want only to state that reality and truth do transcend the factual and the empirical, and to vindicate the human being's capacity to know this transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical. . . We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises. Therefore, a philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation.” *Ibid.*, 62-63.

²⁹For an introduction to Transmodernity see, John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason*, Holy See Web Site (Vatican: Holy See Web Site, 1998), 7: 83.

³⁰In concluding his presentation of the Transmodernism, James Parker III outlines its general profile. “A new transmodern vision seems to be emerging from diverse disciplines. This vision is neither uniform nor monolithic—nor is necessarily theistic. But what it has in common is the rejection of the philosophical naturalists’ or materialists’ claims of modernism (viz., autonomous reason and unjustified progressive optimism) and the rejection of the fundamental assertions of postmodernism (viz., that truth is a community fiction, modals are social constructs, and tradition and classical influence are undesirable and

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one might hesitate to predict the future of this movement (if indeed it can be called a movement), developments on the horizon appear to indicate that a significant (or even monumental) cultural shift is on the offing. Time will tell.³¹ If transmodernity replaces postmodernity, the Emerging Church Movement in its constructive version will prove to be a fad. However, for the same reason, transmodernity would invigorate Grenz's and the vintage Church restorationist theological models (see the Theology section above). Transmodernity and the Emerging Church movement fit well within Pope John Paul II's vision to overcome the shortcomings of postmodernity.³²

Epistemology

A few Evangelical scholars challenge the Emerging Church's accommodation to postmodern relativism and rejection of universal and propositional truth by engaging it at the epistemological level. They show that the Emerging Church epistemological criticisms and commitments have been hasty, superficial, and stand on misunderstandings of Neo-evangelical epistemology, postmodern epistemology, Nonfoundationalism, and Foundationalism. A proper understanding of these areas seriously weakens the epistemological arguments used by Emerging Church leaders.

Paul Kjos Helseth shows that Neo-Evangelical theology is not modernist but classical by assessing the standard post-conservative interpretation of Old Princeton theologians' view of Scripture. According to the standard interpretation Old Princeton theologians' embrace of modernity led them to distort the classical Evangelical doctrine of Scripture into an indefensible precisionism and inerrancy.³³ This issue is important in evaluating the Emerging Church Movement because postconservative theologians argue that while battling the Enlightenment Old Princeton theologians embraced the high standard of certainty modernity demanded.

illegitimate). Transmodernists affirm objective and normative truth without capitulating to a naturalistic scientism, and they affirm true moral values and virtues. They hold out beauty, harmony, and wisdom as real possible entities. Cynicism based in modernist naturalism and postmodern fictions are replaced by hope—a hope that is based on the very nature of things.”

³¹James Parker III, “A Requiem for Postmodernism—Whither Now?,” 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), 307-21.

³²*Ibid.*, 321.

³³John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason*: 7: 86.

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As a result, the argument continues, Old Princetonians transformed Evangelicalism by formulating the inerrantist doctrine of Scripture and the propositional understanding of the theological enterprise. This argument presumes the critical historiographic opinion³⁴ that Old Princeton theologians were modernists.³⁵

Helseth challenges this opinion by arguing that Old Princeton Theologians weren't rationalists. By studying their views in some detail, he concludes, "Despite what the consensus of critical opinion would have us believe, the Princetonians simply weren't rationalists."³⁶ Rather, they "were committed Augustinians who conceived of reason in a moral rather than a merely rational sense."³⁷ Old Princeton theologians did not use scientific but classical reason which Helseth labels "right reason."³⁸ Helseth shows that the critical historiographic view postconservative Evangelicals assume in their dismissal of inerrancy and propositionalism stands on a caricature rather than fact. If Helseth is correct in his assessment of the Princetonians, Neo-Evangelical epistemology, including inerrancy and propositionalism, did not spring from modernity but from the classical tradition the Emerging Church embraces.

D. A. Carson, correctly points out the regional nature of the epistemological relativism used by the Emerging Church. Briefly put,

³⁴The accepted historiographic opinion views Old Princetonian theologians as "thoroughgoing rationalists that compromised 'the original spirit of the Reformation' by accommodating philosophical assumptions that fostered indifference to the subjective and experiential components of religious epistemology, thus encouraging an exceedingly 'wooden' approach to the task of theology both at Old Princeton and in conservative evangelicalism more generally. This assessment is now an essential component of post-conservative evangelicalism's religious historiography." Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's *Renewing the Center*," 44.

³⁵Paul Kyoss Helseth, "'Right Reason' and Theological Aesthetics at Old Princeton Seminary: The 'Mythical Evangelical Ministerium' Reconsidered," 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), 143.

³⁶———, "Are Postconservative Evangelical Fundamentalists? Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," 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), 223-24.

³⁷———, "'Right Reason' and Theological Aesthetics at Old Princeton Seminary: The 'Mythical Evangelical Ministerium' Reconsidered," 143.

³⁸———, "Are Postconservative Evangelical Fundamentalists? Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," 238.

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relativistic epistemology is the American version of postmodernity. Grenz embraces this branch of epistemology according to which knowledge is a social construction.³⁹ Also correctly, Carson points out the important fact that postmodern epistemology does not cancel the objectivity of knowledge or argues for the complete socialization of knowledge.⁴⁰ He recognizes that postmodernism properly affirms that all human knowledge “is necessarily within the bounds of some culture or other, and can thus truly be said to be a social construct. But to run from this fair observation to the insistence that it is improper to talk about objective truth, or about human knowledge of truth, is merely a reflection of being hoodwinked by that one unattainable antithesis [either we know absolutely and omnisciently or we know socially].”⁴¹

It seems that failure to recognize this simple philosophical distinction brings Grenz, Raschke, and the Emerging Church to build their cases on a faddish conception of postmodernity that ignores two main facts. First, postmodernity does not replace modernity but brings it to its fruition. Second, postmodernity does not embrace social construction denying objectivity. Instead, it argues for the need to reinterpret the nature of objectivity and subjectivity altogether on the basis of an epochal shift from Plato’s timeless to Heidegger’s temporal conception of being.

The End of Foundationalism?

So far Evangelical theologians and philosophers have chosen neither to pursue the epistemological consequences of postmodern epistemology Carson describes, nor the ontological shift from which they arise. Instead, they level their epistemological criticism of the Emerging Church movement by vindicating a soft version of foundationalism. The purpose in so doing is to affirm Scripture as providing a reliable foundation for Christian beliefs. In short the epistemological debate between the Emerging Church and conservative Evangelicals is about authority. Should Christians settle questions of belief on the basis of their reading of Scripture or on the basis of their experience as a community?

From inconsistencies he finds in Franke’s presentation Paul Helm’s argues forcefully and persuasively that even in the postmodern

³⁹———, “‘Right Reason’ and Theological Aesthetics at Old Princeton Seminary: The ‘Mythical Evangelical Ministerium’ Reconsidered,” 145-52.

⁴⁰Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*,” 45.

⁴¹Ibid., 46, 47.

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communitarian turn there are foundational beliefs and objective truths.⁴²J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese correctly uncover the foundationalism implicit in the postconservative version of nonfoundationalism by comparing it with Cartesian idealism. Instead of innate ideas in the mind being the foundation of knowledge as Descartes thought, definitions of society are the foundations of knowledge for postconservative theologians. The knower knows only what comes to the mind from society. Society is the foundation of knowledge.⁴³

Moreland and DeWeese express their disappointment at postconservative writers that reject foundationalism “with very little argument.”⁴⁴ Moreover, “the three theoretical commitments that can be discerned in their writings, which may undercut foundationalism, are either themselves highly suspect, or only do so in the case of extreme versions, as straw men that represent no contemporary foundationalists.”⁴⁵ They proceed to present a strong argumentation in favor of a soft version of Foundationalism. In a technical but accessible way they show that through sensory perception, we can access direct knowledge of reality that provides “basic evidence.”⁴⁶ The “modest foundationalism” they propose accepts defeasible perceptual beliefs as properly basic in the foundation of knowledge.⁴⁷ Appropriately, they make clear that epistemology assumes ontology. Ontology is required to explain why perception is a foundation for knowledge or reliable evidence and outline; briefly, how epistemology assumes “the nature of the knowing subject and the ontology of the acts of perception.”⁴⁸

The importance of this philosophical affirmation is to vindicate Scripture as a basic source of evidence. “So, beliefs formed on the basis of reading the Bible are properly basic in a way that is isomorphic or parallel to the way beliefs formed on the basis of seeing a red apple are basic.”⁴⁹ This argument validates the conservative Evangelical view that Christians

⁴²See, *ibid.*, 47.

⁴³Paul Helm, “No Easy Task: John R. Franke and the Character of Theology,” 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), 93-111.

⁴⁴Moreland, “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise,” 96.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

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should use Scripture as the basis of their beliefs, which is precisely what the Emerging Church wants to avoid when the so called “Hodge’s extension” is factored in.

Culture

Evangelical theologians recognize the challenges presented by contemporary cultural trends and the need to face them in the tasks of theology and ministry. However, they think the Emerging Church leaders are going too far when they adapt not only the forms and styles of gospel ministry but also doctrinal contents and the theological methods to the whims of the times.

In a sympathetic evaluation, Evangelical missiologist Ed Stetzer identifies some contributions the Emerging Church makes to Evangelicalism and also expresses some concerns about it. He correctly believes that the Emerging Church’s call to authentic Christian life, emphasis in the Kingdom of God, embrace of the missional turn, promotion of a holistic style of ministry and rejection of theological reductionism are contributions Evangelicals should welcome.⁵⁰ Some concerns are the Emerging Church’s underdeveloped ecclesiology, over contextualization leading to cultural syncretism, and the apparent fear of penal substitutionary atonement.⁵¹

The Emerging Church movement embraces cultural diversity. This deep-seated attitude stems from doctrinal indifference and the strong influence of American culture.⁵² According to Phil Johnson this situation springs from the failure of Fundamentalism and the accrued apathy of Neo-evangelicalism “to maintain focus on the truly essential doctrines of the Christian faith.”⁵³ In this context, heresies are no longer experienced as something negative but as the unavoidable content of Christian diversity.⁵⁴ Literally, doctrinally speaking anything goes. Johnson concludes, that the Emerging Church’s “thoughtless celebration of unbounded diversity is a deadly trait”⁵⁵ that makes the movement impervious to self-correction and

⁵⁰Ibid., 106.

⁵¹Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective,” 86-87.

⁵²Ibid., 87-88.

⁵³Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity,” 213.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 214.

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criticism and “per se augurs disaster.”⁵⁶ This is an example of the “cultural captivity” of the gospel.

Martin Downes argues that the cultural captivity of the gospel takes place when “the thought forms of the age exert control”⁵⁷ over its understanding and proclamation. “When this happens, the gospel becomes a lost message. It no longer sounds distinctive but resonates with the sound of the culture. This does not necessarily mean that people are kept from hearing about Jesus, the good news, the Bible, or the cross. The words themselves may remain, but their content is altered by, and adapted to, the dominant cultural worldview.”⁵⁸ This takes place in the Emerging Church because “the relationship between divine revelation, culture, and theology has been wrongly configured so that doctrine is no longer believed, taught, and confessed as it once was or now ought to be.”⁵⁹ In the process, then, culture changes the gospel instead of the other way around. This change is not of form and style but of content and even of method with an implicit capitulation to liberal theology.⁶⁰ This brings us to the central issue of the role and authority of Scripture in the church.

The Eclipse of Scripture

Agreeing with Martin Downes, Gary Johnson sees the Emerging Church movement as the modernization of Evangelicalism. Put simply, in the Emerging Church movement the modernity that the Old Princetonean theologians, Fundamentalists, and Neo-Evangelicals fought against has found finally a home in evangelical quarters. The Emerging Church signals the capitulation of conservative evangelicals to modernity.⁶¹ In a well-

⁵⁶Ibid., 223.

⁵⁷Ibid., 214.

⁵⁸Martin Downes, “Entrapment: The Emerging Church Conversation and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel,” 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), 224.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 225.

⁶¹ “Because of the diversity within the emerging church, one must be careful not to overgeneralize. It is obvious, however, that a vocal segment of the emerging church, though claiming to be evangelical, has great affinity with theological liberalism. Non-conservatives are honored.” Ibid., 227. “For all its criticism of ‘modernity’ it appears now that postfoundationalism is really only late or liquid foundationalism, and for all its shapelessness, liquidity continues to assume Enlightenment ‘givens,’ such as human autonomy relative to all other authorities and the centrality of the human knower relative to all knowledge.” Larry D. Pettigrew, “Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging

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argued article Johnson concludes, “Under the guise of our postmodern context, post-conservatives are moving in the same direction as Schleiermacher and Briggs. Despite their protest to the contrary, they have already begun to go down this same path.”⁶² This implies the Emerging Church embraces the historical critical method of biblical interpretation and the philosophical and theological assumptions from which it works. Obviously, embracing modernity has momentous implications for Scripture and theology. In this section we will survey the ways in which conservative evangelicals evaluate the impact of modernity in Scripture. In the next section we will survey its impact on theology.

A. B. Caneday notices, correctly, that the Emerging Church’s view of Scripture displaces the authority of the Bible from the text to the inaccessible work of the Spirit.⁶³ In other words, the words of Scripture are

Church,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 17, no. 2 (2006): 174.

⁶²R. Scott Clark, “Whosoever Will be Saved: Emerging Church, Meet Christian Dogma,” 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), 119. “Despite the rasping protests of some post-conservatives, the parallels between what Schleiermacher was attempting to do in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the proposals of this group of evangelicals that fondly refers to themselves as ‘emergents’ or ‘post-conservatives,’ are striking. In a provocative essay that attempts to sanitize Schleiermacher for contemporary evangelicals Nicola Hoggard Creegan rightly observes that Schleiermacher is the one voice from the past that speaks directly to our postmodern situation.” Johnson, “Introduction,” 26.

⁶³ “Their appropriation of speech-act theory entails misappropriation, for Grenz and Franke focus upon the Spirit’s appropriation of Scripture, which is hardly accessible as speech-acts, instead of focusing upon the Scriptures which are the Spirit’s *accessible* speech-acts. Though they regard these *inaccessible* speech-acts of the Spirit to be ‘closely bound to the text.’ The Spirit’s world construction does not reside in the text. This is so because the biblical text is not the Spirit’s creative speech itself; Scripture is just the instrumentality of the Spirit’s creative speech. So it is outside Scripture that ‘the Spirit performs the perlocutionary act of creating *world*.’ Thus, however closely linked the Spirit’s present inaccessible speaking may be with Scripture, Grenz and Franke locate the Spirit’s present speaking outside the canon. They do so because the new world the Spirit creates in his perlocutionary act ‘is not simply the world surrounding the ancient text itself. It is the eschatological world God intends for creation as disclosed in the text.’ In fact, they say that the Spirit’s perlocutionary act of world construction ‘does not lie in the text itself.’ They dislodge the perlocutionary act from the locutionary and illocutionary acts. By the Spirit’s appropriation of the biblical text the ‘Spirit performs the perlocutionary act of creating a world through he illocutionary act of speaking, that is, of appropriating the biblical text as the instrumentality of divine speaking.’” ———, “Introduction,” 15-16. Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Post Conservatism’s Use of Language Games and Speech Act Theory,” 155.

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not the words of God but the words of human beings and therefore of tradition. The word of God is the elusive work or action of the Holy Spirit that takes place beyond the realm of human words.⁶⁴

The dislodging of Spirit and the actual meanings of the words and texts of Scripture is characteristic of modern theology. By so doing, Postconservatism is mobilizing against the “commitment to the reliability of Scripture, to Scripture as the source of theological construction, and to the nature of theological task being one of reflecting first on Scripture as the grounds for both theology and life.”⁶⁵ This view of Scripture is unacceptable for conservative Evangelicals.⁶⁶ After all, we need to bear in mind that “[t]he Reformers’ so called ‘Scripture principle’ identified the Bible as God’s words in human speech.”⁶⁷ Moreover, William G. Travis correctly reminds evangelicals that the inerrancy of Scripture did not begin in the XIX century. Instead, “[s]uch belief is fundamental for J. A. Bengel the most noteworthy Pietist Bible scholar of the eighteenth century; was present in the beginnings of the Wesleyan movement; was integral to the

⁶⁴“The postconservative project, guided by Grenz and Franke, turns the Bible into something other than what it actually is just as much as some evangelicals have unwisely done when they attempt to locate God’s revelation—the real locus of God’s revelation and authority—somewhere other than in the text of Scripture.” See also, Stephen Wellum, Jr., “Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Paul Kjos Helseth, Millard J. Erickson, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 191.

⁶⁵Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Post Conservatism’s use of Language Games and Speech Act Theory,” 156.

⁶⁶ “Does not Scripture’s use of Scripture teach us how we are to read and to use Scripture to shape and to ground the beliefs and behavior of God’s people? Should not Christians always be striving to embrace the first-order language of God’s revelation as their own in such a manner that their own second-order formulations of things believed asymptotically move toward the fullness of Scripture’s first-order form and content? This is the hermeneutical spiral in which Christians, theologians or not, find themselves as they immerse themselves in God’s Word.” Chad Owen Brand, “Defining Evangelicalism,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2004), 304. Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Post Conservatism’s use of Language Games and Speech Act Theory,” 158.

⁶⁷See also, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149.

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holiness movement and its denominational spin-offs; and was a given among the majority of the Pentecostals.”⁶⁸

Correctly recognizing that “Scripture is the most fundamental of all fundamental doctrines, since it is the fundamental on which all the other fundamentals rest,”⁶⁹ Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe give a disapproving evaluation of the Emerging Church’s view of Scripture using strong and clear language. According to them, “Grenz and McLaren are not only postmodern but they are also post-Christian. Their rejection of the classical orthodox view of Scripture is sweeping. It includes a rejection of the correspondence view of truth, a rejection of objective truth, propositional truth, and inerrant truth in Scripture.”⁷⁰ Stephen Wellum agrees. He finds the Emerging Church’s surrendering of Biblical authority to the community of faith unacceptable for Evangelicals. For Evangelicals authority resides in the Bible not in the church.⁷¹

To the issues of Biblical inspiration and authority Douglas Bount adds the all-important issue of interpretation. Correctly explaining that interpretation always involves presuppositions and assumptions, which, according to him, we choose based on our personal or communal “taste.” On this basis, he faults Emerging Church theologians for defining their presuppositions based on the “taste” of postmodern culture instead of on the taste of the “apostolic faith.”⁷² This choice determines biblical interpretation

⁶⁸Downes, “Entrapment: The Emerging Church Conversation and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel,” 233.

⁶⁹William G. Travis, “Pietism and the History of American Evangelicalism,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Paul Kjos Helseth, Millard J. Erickson, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 278-79.

⁷⁰Norman and Thomas Howe Geisler, “A Postmodern View of Scripture,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 107.

⁷¹ “What I find surrendered is biblical authority—i.e., a text that is first-order and God-given through human authors which is our basis for how we interpret the world, ground our beliefs, and live our lives. Without that solid grounding, not in human reason and autonomy, nor in the community of God’s people, but in Scripture itself, we have, in terms of theological method, surrendered the very transcendental condition for the possibility of doing theology in any kind of normative fashion.” *Ibid.*, 107-08.

⁷² “What distinguishes orthodoxy from heresy, then, is not *whether* each reads the sacred text; rather what distinguishes them is *how* each reads it. Orthodoxy reads the Bible with tastes thoroughly formed by the apostolic faith; heresy reads it with tastes formed by something other than that faith.” Wellum, “Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent

in the Emerging Church and further weakens the message and role of Scripture.

Carson summarizes well the Emerging Church view of Scripture by pointing out that “Grenz’s reformulation of the doctrine of Scripture is so domesticated by postmodern relativism that it stands well and truly outside of the evangelical camp (whether ‘evangelical’ is here understood theologically or socially/historically).”⁷³ In so doing, the Emerging Church emasculates from evangelicalism the ground (Scripture) from which the Reformation emerged away from tradition,⁷⁴ and replaces it with the tradition from which it emerged. In short, by emerging away from Scripture and building on tradition the Emerging Church seems to be the undoing of the Reformation.

Theology

Let us now consider briefly some Evangelical reactions to the theological consequences of the Emerging Church’s surrender to modernity, abandonment of the Scripture principle, and corresponding turning back to tradition. Let us first consider briefly some comments on the general theological approach of the Emerging Church to then consider some comments on selected theological contents.

The postmodern turn to the community Grenz embraces means that the doctrines of the church are not true in an objective sense. Instead, community doctrines are “true”⁷⁵ for the community of faith that formulates them and agrees to use them as “rule of life.” Thus, doctrines have only

Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis,” 193.

⁷³Douglas Blount, “A New Kind of Interpretation: Brian McLaren and the Hermeneutics of Taste,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 126.

⁷⁴ Carson explains this point very correctly and clearly. “What drove the Reformation was the conviction among all its leaders, that the Roman Catholic Church had departed from Scripture and had introduced theology and practices that were inimical to genuine Christian faith. In other words, they wanted things to change, not because they perceived that new developments had taken place in the culture so that the church was called to adapt its approach to the new cultural profile, but because they perceived that new theology and practices had developed in the church that contravened Scripture and therefore that things needed to be reformed by the Word of God.” Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*,” 50.

⁷⁵———, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*: 42.

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“intrasystematic” “church community” status.⁷⁶ Representative conservative evangelical A. B. Caneday criticizes Grenz’s view of doctrines as describing the beliefs of the community for the community but not referring to truths in the real world. The theological approach of the Emerging Church, in good modernistic fashion, assumes that truth ultimately belongs to the domains of science and philosophy not of religion or theology.

Regarding the general approach to theology Ronald Gleason suggests in the Emerging Church there is a theological paradigm shift “away from soteriology toward ecclesiology.”⁷⁷ Gleason suggests this shift takes place on one side because Emerging Church leaders are “misinformed about Reformed theology” and on the other because they follow “Barth, Frei, Grenz, Olson, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Yoder, and others in the theological realm and Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty in the philosophical.”⁷⁸ Moreover, the theological shift from a system centered on soteriology to one centered in ecclesiology seems to find inspiration and encouragement in the so-called New Perspective on Paul advanced by renowned authors such as E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright.⁷⁹ This view moves closer to mysticism and union with Christ, and therefore closer to the church and away from forensic justification as central to soteriology. Simultaneously, however, and mainly, Gleason argues that this shift fits the basic subjectivism of the modern approach to theology that places the individual and communities as sources of beliefs and understanding.⁸⁰

Arguing from the writings of Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck on theological method Gleason suggests that even though theologians properly draw materials from “Holy Scripture, Church’s Confessions, and Christian Consciousness [the believer]”⁸¹ they should maintain a proper equilibrium between them. Theologians achieve this balance when they give precedence and preeminence in their method to the Holy Scripture. Precedence and

⁷⁶Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Post Conservatism’s Use of Language Games and Speech Act Theory,” 150.

⁷⁷Ibid., 150-51.

⁷⁸Ronald Gleason, “Church and Community: or Community and 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), 174.

⁷⁹Ibid., 180.

⁸⁰Ibid., 171.

⁸¹Ibid., 187.

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preeminence mean that “[t]he whole of Scripture must prove the whole (theological) system.”⁸²

Not surprisingly, conservative Evangelicals have strong disagreements with Emerging Church’s theological and doctrinal views. For instance, Guy Prentiss describes, compares, and evaluates from Scripture N. T. Wright’s views of Christ’s Kingdom of God strongly embraced by emerging theology and ministry and finds them failing to respond to important biblical teachings.⁸³ Focusing on Brian McLaren’s rejection of the doctrine of Hell, Greg D. Gilbert concludes that McLaren “has misunderstood the gospel as a whole.”⁸⁴ His reason for such a serious indictment is that McLaren has lost sight of “the meaning and centrality of the cross, he has all but ignored the eschatological and spiritual character of the kingdom of God, and he has done everything in his hermeneutical power to read the traditional doctrine of hell out of the Bible. All in all, there does not really seem to be much of the gospel there left to deny.”⁸⁵

Adam W. Greenway summarizes “the most consistent criticism” leveled against the Emerging Church by the various authors of the volume *Evangelical Engaging Emergent* and elsewhere, as “the overarching lack of concern for doctrinal content and precision.”⁸⁶ He correctly concludes that Emerging Church theology “resonates with twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy: dynamic views on Scripture’s inspiration and avoidance of descriptors like ‘inerrant’ and ‘infallible,’ emphasis on Jesus’ human nature and moral example rather than divine essence and redeeming sacrifice, strong commitment to social justice and ministry, discomfort with Reformational theology, ecumenism, center-left political values—the list goes on.”⁸⁷ The crucial disagreement between the Emerging Church and Evangelicalism revolves around the interpretation of the Gospel. Emerging Church leaders think that the problem with Evangelicalism is not only methodological but theological as well. The message itself must “evolve”

⁸²Ibid., 178.

⁸³Ibid., 179.

⁸⁴Waters, “It’s ‘Wright,’ But is it Right? An Assessment and Engagement of an ‘Emerging’ Rereading of the Ministry of Jesus,” 193-96.

⁸⁵Greg D. Gilbert, “Saved from the Wrath of God: An Examination of Brian McLaren’s Approach to the Doctrine of Hell,” 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), 268.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Greenway, “Conclusion,” 334.

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and “change.” According to Greenway this is not acceptable to Evangelicals because Emerging Church leaders advance a message that “hardly resembles the evangelical gospel of grace.”⁸⁸

However, Darrell Bock and Robert Sagers give sympathetic verdicts on Emerging Church Christologies and Salvation. On Christology Bock concludes by appealing to all sides of the conversation “for balance, in which I believe there is more need for some both/and thinking versus the either/or. I also question arguments that appeal for more of some components at the seeming expense of other key components. What we all need to seek is more consideration of genuine integration, rather than taking sides with guns loaded.”⁸⁹ On Salvation, Robert Sagers arrive at a similar conclusion. While recognizing that when facing false teachers “Evangelicals must put priority on the gospel over other considerations” he acknowledges that, “there are also some voices within the emerging church movement who are pointing out real deficiencies with the way Evangelicals have understood the doctrine of salvation. Where these voices are consonant with that of the Spirit of Christ as revealed in the Scripture, we should listen humbly.”⁹⁰

Ecumenism

Evangelical reactions to the Emerging Church’s ecumenical embrace of Roman Catholicism exhibit the fragmented and even contradictory ecclesiologies held by Evangelical denominations.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, sympathetic and critical evaluations of the ecclesiology of the Emerging Church can be found.

Travis Barbour and Nicholas Toews agree with the Emerging Church’s attempt to mediate between liberal and conservatives in the Church but challenge the methodology of “revolution” embraced by emergents and favor “evolution.” In other words, they disagree with the method but not with the goal. In so doing they implicitly accept the Emerging Church as

⁸⁸Ibid., 335.

⁸⁹Ibid., 336.

⁹⁰Darrell Bock, “Emergent/Emerging Christologies,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 186.

⁹¹Robert Sagers, “The Emerging Church and Salvation,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 217-18.

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part of the broad Evangelical ecclesiological experience.⁹² Following a similar approach, Leron Shults sees no danger in the fact that “[a]t its core, the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology (doctrine of the church).”⁹³ On the contrary, he believes the Emerging Church’s ecclesiological experience sheds light in the ongoing reflection about how to make the Christian church better.⁹⁴ Consequently, he studies the Emerging Church phenomenon to enhance the Evangelical ecclesiological understanding.⁹⁵ Ecumenism does not come into the picture of Shults’ evaluation.

From an Anabaptist Mennonite perspective, Alan Stuky sees close similarities between the ecclesiological experience of Anabaptists and the Emerging Church movement. Consequently, he does not perceive the Emerging Church’s implicit ecclesiology as a threat to Evangelicalism but rather as a kindred community from which to learn. According to Stuky, “the Emerging Church resembles sixteenth-century Anabaptism in striking ways.”⁹⁶ Core similarities between Anabaptism and the Emergent Church are discipleship (following the way of Jesus) and living in community. But the most significant parallels revolve around the ecclesiological notions of decentralization of power, intentional involvement of the members of the church, “and the Kingdom of God for understanding the mission of the church.”⁹⁷ While recognizing the significant differences between the two movements, Stuky concludes “they seem to be two cars driving in the same direction on the highway of faith. They have enough affinity for each other that interaction between the two is important and will, hopefully, bear much fruit in the future.”⁹⁸ Stuky seems to assume and embrace an ecumenical

⁹²Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*,” 52.

⁹³Travis Barbour, and Nicholas Toews, “The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique,” *Direction* 39, no. 1 (2010): 35.

⁹⁴“The rapid growth of ‘emerging’ churches worldwide provides a new opportunity for reflection on the nature and task of the church. This article briefly outlines some of the tensions this movement raises in relation to the traditional ‘marks’ of the church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic). It identifies some ways toward a reconstructive and reformative ecclesiology that also recognizes that followers of the way of Christ are multiple, embedded, particular, and hospitable.” McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today,” 37.

⁹⁵F. LeRon Shults, “Reforming Ecclesiology in Emerging Churches,” *Theology Today* 65, no. 4 (2009): 425.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Stucky, “Anabaptism and Emergence: Collision or Convergence,” 23-24.

⁹⁸Ibid., 24.

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approach to ecclesiology and therefore comes close to the Emerging Church's emphasis on ecumenism.

Mark Devine provides a positive evaluation of the Emerging Church movement by arguing that it includes two streams, one friendly to classical Evangelical doctrines and the other adverse to or wary of them.⁹⁹ By disconnecting doctrines from ministry and mission he welcomes the many positive points he believes the Emerging Church is advancing in attempting to be the Christian Church. The assumption is that Emerging Church ecclesiological emphases such as the need for: genuine community characterized by authentic relationships,¹⁰⁰ becoming aware of the meaning of the gospel and sharing it by way of cultural contextualization,¹⁰¹ experiencing the Gospel from within a missional mind-set,¹⁰² and, recovering narrative, history, and mystery¹⁰³ can be experienced with different sets of theological and doctrinal understandings. Devine argues that Evangelicals should be open to engage Emerging Church pastors and theologians that affirm the doctrinal beliefs of conservative American Evangelicals with an irenic spirit.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Devine's approach seems to advocate a much less open attitude toward emerging evangelicals that challenge the traditional doctrines of Evangelicalism.

Paul Doerksen is less sympathetic to Emerging Church ecclesiology because he sees it adapting too readily to the surrounding culture. In his view the appropriate Evangelical relation to culture is contextualization.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁰Devine, "The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams," 7-8.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 11.

¹⁰²Ibid., 11-23.

¹⁰³Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁰⁴ "How should Evangelicals respond to emerging church pastors and planters who combine exemplary zeal for the conversion of souls with crystal clear confession of core theological commitments ranging from the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christological consensus spanning Nicea and Chalcedon to the justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Should not unashamed confession of core doctrines combined with evident zeal for church-planting and conversion-seeking evangelism justify an assume-the-best posture and a measure of patience where emerging church speech and practice raise concerns among Evangelicals?" Ibid., 31-38.

¹⁰⁵ "To my mind, this drive to embrace all forms of church expression, combined with a less than robust notion of church as contrast-society, is closely related to the Emerging Church failure to distinguish adequately between contextualization and correlation as these relate to the church's relationship to the world. McLaren and other Emerging Church writers are good interpreters of culture and consistently grapple in important ways for the church to be relevant to the world, to resist insularity and isolationism. However, a fairly consistent

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According to him, this approach blurs the discontinuity that should exist between the church and the world.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, although Doerksen is critical of the Emerging Church's ecclesiology, he seems comfortable with the ecumenical view of the church.¹⁰⁷

Departing from previous sympathetic evaluations, Larry D. Pettegrew warns against the obvious rapprochement of the Emerging Church with Roman Catholicism at the foundational levels of worship and spirituality. He correctly and clearly explains, "The medieval church is not admirable. As a whole, the medieval church did not proclaim the gospel, or justification by faith, or believers' baptism, or the imminent return of Christ, or separation of church and state, or freedom of conscience, or the autonomy of the local church, or proper view of the Lord's Supper . . . The list could be lengthy. Some of the best literature from this period—the writings of the mystics, for example—shows people desperate to find a relationship with God, but hardly succeeding. And the worship style of the medieval church, regardless of how beautiful or reverent it might seem, was a poor substitute for genuine Christianity."¹⁰⁸ Additionally, he reminds evangelicals that because the center of Protestant 'sacred spaces' has historically been the pulpit, where God's Word can be taught and preached the medieval church is a poor model to impose on the youth of the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁹ Implicitly, this evaluation warns against the ecumenical bend to Rome espoused by the Emerging Church leaders.

Following the same line of thought and with similar clarity Gary Gilley points out "that the vintage church to which Kimball refers is not a return to the New Testament church. The vintage church has been waylaid by medieval Catholicism, which we must remember may have experienced the spiritual through the senses, but nevertheless was an apostate religion. Simply providing unbelievers with a religious experience, which they might

note struck by McLaren is that the church must take many of its cues for change from the surrounding culture, especially as he understands surrounding postmodern culture, a concern evident both in his content and writing style. But to privilege culture while attempting to shape change is to engage too heartily in correlation." *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰⁶ "My complaint about the propensity for correlation rather than contextualization is closely related to the observation that there needs to be *more* discontinuity between church and world in the work of the Emerging Church, rather than focusing on the discontinuity between the modern and postmodern noted above." Paul G. Doerksen, "The Air Is Not Quite Fresh: Emerging Church Ecclesiology," *Direction* 39, no. 1 (2010): 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Pettegrew, "Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church," 168.

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interpret as an encounter with God, may do them more harm than good. Just as the seeker-sensitive church saw felt-needs as the means of connecting with unbelievers, so the emerging church sees spiritual experience. The philosophy is basically the same, just the methods have changed.”¹¹⁰

Back to the Future

In the last section of this article I want to consider briefly the programmatic vision for Evangelical theology renowned Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson articulates by way of conclusion to “Reclaiming the Center,” a volume he coedited with Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor.¹¹¹ My purpose is to ascertain how a seasoned Evangelical theologian views the way in which Evangelicals should engage in the task of doing theology to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that postmodernity and the Emerging Church places before them.

Erickson believes that postmodernity and its effects in the Emerging Church have brought a lack of clarity (obscuration, fogging) that have brought further fragmentation into the already divided Evangelical coalition.¹¹² This causes “visibility” in theological discussions to be low. However, he believes Evangelicals are beginning to emerge from this situation and proposes several characteristics that will enable them “to find the landmarks.”¹¹³ Erickson works on the conviction that postmodernity is beginning to be transcended and that the way ahead involves a going back “to values and ideas of an earlier period, although they will not simply be a repetition of an earlier form.”¹¹⁴

According to Erickson to emerge from the fog of postmodernity Evangelical theology should be global, objective, practical, accessible, postcommunal, metanarrative, dialogical, and, futuristic.

To be *global* Evangelical theology should listen to theologians from around the world and will be open to their insights.¹¹⁵ To be *objective* Evangelical theology should include a correspondence theory of truth and metaphysical realism.¹¹⁶ Moreover, it should embrace a “neo,” “soft,” or

¹¹⁰Ibid., 169.

¹¹¹Gilley, “The Emergent Church,” 276.

¹¹²Erickson, “On Flying in Theological Fog,” 323-49.

¹¹³Ibid., 324-25.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 325.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 325-28.

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“modest” foundationalism, as advanced by philosophers William Alston and Robert Audi, found in Reformed epistemologists like Plantinga and Wolterstorff, and embraced by Evangelicals like J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese.¹¹⁷ Finally, to be *objective* Evangelical theology should build on a “post new” historicism that leaves behind the “old” and “new” historicisms. The old historicism attempted to determine historical facts and drew conclusions from them. The new historicism arrived at a conclusion and then justified it by creating historical data to fit it.¹¹⁸ Instead, the “post-new” historicism will seek what really happened in the past while accepting its own historical conditionedness, yet seeking to minimize it.¹¹⁹

To be *practical* and *accessible* Evangelical theology should work in close connection with the practice of ministry.¹²⁰ It should be a ministerial theology addressing and embracing the whole church by relating to life and human predicaments.¹²¹ To be *postcommunal* Evangelical theology should not be based on the community but in Scripture. Yet, it should also “be thoroughly familiar with the culture into which one wishes to speak the Christian message, and to contextualize the message in such a way as to be better understood.”¹²² To be *metanarrative* Evangelical theology should affirm the universality and exclusiveness of Christianity vis-à-vis all other religions and philosophies.¹²³ To be *dialogical* Evangelical theology should interact “with different theologies, considering thoughtfully their claims, and advancing its own with cogent argumentation.”¹²⁴ Finally, to be *futuristic* evangelical theology should anticipate what is to come and prepare for it “so that its answers will not be merely to the questions that are then past.”¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ “Future evangelical theology will be based on a foundationalism of this latter type, a foundationalism that regards some conceptions and propositions as basic, from which other propositions derive their validity, but without claiming indubitability as did classical foundationalism.” *Ibid.*, 329-30.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 339.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 343-45.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

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Summary

Before drawing some conclusions on the brief and incomplete sample of evidence regarding the way in which Evangelical scholars are evaluating the Emerging Church movement I will summarize the findings briefly.

On worship Evangelical evaluations are almost non-existent in the data I considered. However, I found one scholarly argument criticizing the Emerging Church abandonment of the classical Evangelical sermon in favor of a conversation. This move has implicit negative implications for Emerging Church spirituality and worship styles but does not necessarily conflict with them. Additionally, I found a lay ministry strongly opposed to the Emerging Church spirituality. Finally, the positive evaluation of the Emerging Church's embrace of early Church tradition by one group of scholars seems to suggest that Evangelicals share the same approach to spirituality and worship advanced by the Emerging Church leaders, and approach that conflicts with some lay ministries.

On postmodernity Evangelical evaluations are negative. They reject cultural and epistemological relativism as incompatible with Evangelicalism. Some, experiencing modernity only as a social phenomenon, argue that it will soon fade away and be replaced by something different. Those viewing postmodernity as an epistemological position challenge it face on. I found three proposals to overcome postmodern epistemological relativism. A revelational option advances the notion that Evangelical theology should stand on faith in Scripture. A metaphysical option advances the notion that Evangelical theology should stand on classical metaphysics. The third option advances the notion that a new "transmodern" epistemology still in the making might replace current postmodern views. Of course, since nobody knows what the future holds it is too early to tell whether future epistemologies may help or hurt Evangelical theology.

On epistemology Evangelical evaluations are also negative. The reactions surveyed were apologetical rather than epistemological. The main point is to show that the Emerging Church's use and embrace of postmodernity is not necessary. Answering the argument that since Evangelical inerrantism is modernist, postmodernity leaves it baseless. Heltseth shows that Evangelical inerrantism originates not in modern but classical times, a period of the Church embraced by Emerging Church leaders. Answering the argument that postmodern epistemology dictates the end of absolute reason and truth Carson shows that the Emerging Church

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uses the American version of postmodernity according to which knowledge is social construction. Yet, he correctly points out the existence of other forms of postmodern epistemology that do not eliminate objectivity but rather calls for its reinterpretation, which is still in the making.

On the end of Foundationalism Evangelical evaluations have a negative verdict. They argue that the Emerging Church uses nonfoundationalism in an extreme, unfeasible way. They fail to realize that nonfoundationalism actually has foundations, and therefore is not actually possible to maintain in the absence of all foundations whatsoever. They argue epistemological nonfoundationalism rejects extreme forms of foundationalism, but not its soft versions. Moreover, they present a strong and well-articulated defense of a soft version of epistemological foundationalism that allows believers to claim Scripture provides basic evidence to form Christian beliefs as much as sensory perception allows scientists to form scientific beliefs.

On the Eclipse of Scripture, Evangelical evaluations are decidedly negative. They correctly view the Emerging Church view of Scripture as being a full-fledged capitulation to modernity and Neo-Orthodoxy. They reject the sacramental view of Scripture according to which the work of the Spirit is dislodged from the contents of the words of Scripture. God actually speaks in the words of Scripture. They are authoritative for all Christians. Although not explicitly stated, this view implies the eclipse of tradition, the reversal of the Emerging Church's eclipse of Scripture. There is no affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* or *tota Scriptura* principles.

Not surprisingly, Evangelicals have a rather superficial and even divided evaluation of Emerging Church's theology. Obviously, they disagree with the notion that doctrines are just the expression of human traditions. Most criticism takes place at the doctrinal level. For instance, the fact that the Emerging Church fails to uphold traditional evangelical doctrines like the doctrine of Hell, and, embrace the emphasis on soteriology. Perhaps the most important doctrinal criticism is the Emerging Church's movement away from understanding the gospel and the Kingdom of God from the sole perspective of forensic justification. To Evangelicals, this amounts to a distortion or even rejection of the gospel, the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls. So far, however, Evangelical's state their obvious doctrinal differences with Emerging Church leaders but stop short from engaging Emergent theology with their arguments. Pondering the fact that at times Emerging leaders advance heretical views that sound biblical

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some Evangelicals are calling for openness and theological engagement even in the central issue of the atonement.

Evangelical reactions on ecclesiology and ecumenism are divided. While some welcome and resonate with the ecumenical nature or the Emerging Church, others warn about it implicitly at least on the basis that it involves the acceptance of Roman Catholic theology and their view of the Church. In short, some favor a return to Rome while others oppose it.

Finally, representing a group of Evangelicals evaluating the Emerging Church in theological depth, Erickson concludes that postmodernity is passing and Evangelicals should move ahead by going back to their Evangelical convictions. Some of them are, the correspondence theory of truth, metaphysical realism, soft foundationalism, new historicism—faithful to historical acts but sensitive to historical interpretation—, incarnational ministry where Scriptural doctrine is contextualized to cultural situations, claim to universal truth, and solid argumentation that answers current questions and issues.

Conclusions

From the brief description of some sample Evangelical evaluations of the Emerging Church movement I will attempt to draw some very general and tentative conclusions in hopes that 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 emerged 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 has originated and is evolving inside the walls of Evangelical denominations. As a sector within Evangelicalism, the Emerging Church is in the early stages of development. Its full theological and ministerial shape is still in the future. Having inherited five centuries of Protestant ecclesiological fragmentariness the Emerging Church is strongly motivated and focused to overcome it by engaging in ecumenical theology, ministry, and ecclesiology.

Not only Luther and Calvin but also Emerging Church theologians and ministers develop their theological systems using Roman Catholic ontological and metaphysical foundations. Although rarely recognized, studied, challenged or interpreted, implicitly these principles provide the hermeneutical foundations for both Evangelical and Emerging Church

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theologies and ministries. They provide the real operative basis for theological and spiritual unity not only among them but also within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches from which they inherited them by way of tradition.

After the two initial centuries when Protestantism gradually emerged from Scripture, challenges from science and culture confronted its unstable and underdeveloped theology for the next three centuries. During that time, Evangelicals responded to the challenges of modernity by way of apologetics, the inerrancy of Scripture, and intra-ecumenical Evangelical alliances, but failed to produce a grand theological and philosophical synthesis. Arguably due to this absence, during the twentieth century the ground of the Protestant Reformation began to switch progressively from Scripture to philosophy, culture, and tradition in the spiritual, theological, and ministerial experiences of evangelicals. This might help to explain why early in the twenty first century, the Emerging Church movement has turned for theological and spiritual guidance to theological, philosophical, and spiritual synthesis produced by liberal Protestantism and Christian tradition.

Thus, radically departing from the American Evangelical tradition the Emerging Church does not experience the teachings of Modern philosophy and science as serious challenges to their understanding of Scripture and the doctrines of Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular. This may help us to comprehend why when facing the absence of simple answers to modern scientific and philosophical challenges to Scripture and Christian doctrines, Emerging Church leaders feel free to follow the example of Christian tradition and their Liberal Evangelical predecessors who have progressively accommodated Bible interpretations and teachings to the dictates of philosophy, science, and popular culture in the areas of theology, doctrines, ministry, and worship. In short, failure to develop a grand philosophical and theological synthesis of Evangelical Christianity in the face of modern philosophy and science has brought an influential sector of young Evangelical leaders to adopt the well developed classical and neo-Orthodox syntheses and its correspondent secularizing effects on Scripture, theology, doctrines, worship, music, and liturgy.

By implicitly adopting the Classical and Neo-Orthodox syntheses of philosophy and theology as articulated by Augustine, Aquinas, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann, the Emerging Church has explicitly challenged the theological center and leadership of the American Evangelical coalition. In so doing, it has further fractured the already

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fragmented theological and ecclesiological existence of Protestantism. The leadership of the Evangelical coalition and the future of the Protestant Reformation are at stake.

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.

Due to its strong philosophical commitments, grass roots engagement, and simultaneous origination, the Emerging Church movement does not seem to be a passing fad as some Evangelicals leaders think. Instead, it appears to be a new stage in the historical and theological development of American Evangelicalism.

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

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