

## **The Emerging Church–Part 4: Levels of Change**

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In this series of articles I am considering the changes Protestantism is experiencing at the beginning of the twenty first century and its implications for the future of the Evangelical movement in America. In previous articles I have presented a brief historical and theological background, description, and evaluation of the broad changes presently taking place under the Emerging Church umbrella designation. In this article I will identify the major levels where these changes are occurring and some of their implications for the future theological and ministerial task of Evangelical Christians.

As we proceed, I will deal briefly with the nature and consequences of the changes experienced by the Emerging Church sector of the Evangelical movement. Specifically, are we to see these changes as a passing fad affecting the level of praxis (evangelism, mass media communication, music) where the gospel is packaged, or, as reaching deeper into the level of thinking (philosophy and theology) and life (ministerial paradigm) where the Gospel is interpreted and experienced? In other words, is the Emerging Church a minor or a major evolutionary mutation in Evangelical history? We need to ascertain this point because partial evidence suggests Evangelicals are divided on it. We will also keep in mind the question about whether the changes underway are signaling the end of the Protestant Reformation.

### Epochal Change?

Change belongs to the fabric of American life. During the last part of the twentieth century American Evangelicalism experienced rapid changes in worship and ministerial styles in a desperate effort to reach an ever increasingly secularized culture.<sup>1</sup> On the surface the Emerging Church movement appears to be a new passing fad in youth ministry. However, parallel to these seemingly superficial changes in ministerial style the old conservative-liberal controversy was simmering across denominational lines<sup>2</sup> creating conflicts at ministerial and grassroots levels.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the inerrancy of Scripture and the apologetical efforts of previous Evangelical generations were not enough to produce an Evangelical synthesis able to generate unity within denominations.

With the passing of time an increasing number of Evangelical leaders began to realize “that this conflict was not your average, everyday schism, but a paradigm shift of seismic proportions.”<sup>4</sup> This conviction led emergent leaders to reexamine critically their denominations’ “assumptions of what it means to be church. Some suggest that this ‘Great Emergence’ is part of a cyclical pattern of upheavals in the church, on a par with the ‘Great Schism’ or the ‘Great Reformation.’”<sup>5</sup> To gain a sense of the proportions and depth of the changes presently underway consider Phyllis Tickle’s suggestion that Brian McLaren is the new Luther and his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is

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<sup>1</sup> See the first article of the series.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emerging Frontier*, 18-21.

<sup>3</sup> “We learned that major paradigm shifts are almost always accompanied by turmoil and disorder. Take science, for example. The primary mission of science is the discovery and integration of new knowledge. Yet studies have shown that when confronted with data that conflicted with the dominant paradigm, scientists reacted anxiously. Warring camps developed: ‘liberal’ camps prematurely proposed new paradigms based on insufficient data, while ‘conservative’ camps defended the old paradigm by attacking the new data and the proposed paradigms. Eventually, the old paradigm always fell, yet neither camp really won. Some aspects of the liberal camps’ proposals found their way into the new paradigm; many did not. Some aspects of the old paradigm, which the conservative camps were protecting, remained standing; many did not. Because their vision was still limited by the old paradigm, both camps were blind sided.” Howard, *A New Middle Way? Surviving and Thriving in the Coming Religious Realignment*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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the equivalent to Luther's 95 theses.<sup>6</sup> This comparison may help us to understand that for many observers something epochal is underway. According to Tickle's socio-historical interpretation, a new form of Christianity is being born and will be added to the old forms.<sup>7</sup> This seems to suggest that the Emerging Church movement may be unleashing deep paradigmatic changes not only in American Evangelicalism but also in Protestantism and Christianity as a whole. To consider the validity of this claim we need to examine the nature and content of these paradigmatic changes. But before we do so, let us ask "why" such an "epochal" change is underway. Something inside and outside Christianity must be at work making such a change desirable and even necessary.

### Dissatisfaction

A growing discontentment seems to have been brewing within the broad Evangelical coalition for a long time. Causes of dissatisfaction are many and as varied as Evangelicalism. For instance, some are dissatisfied with the way ministers and the churches conduct their everyday business.<sup>8</sup> Others feel frustrated when they see churches playing an institutional game voided of spiritual meaning.<sup>9</sup> Many, probably overstating their case, believe "modern" Evangelical Churches are dead.<sup>10</sup> But dissatisfaction runs even deeper. Numerous evangelical believers experience a growing confusion about Christian doctrines as

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<sup>6</sup> "In the same way that Martin Luther became the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great Reformation, so too has Brian McLaren become the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great emergence. His 2005 volume, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Harper: San Francisco) is both an analog to Luther's ninety-five theses and also a clearly stated overview of many of the parts of post-Constantinian Christian theology that are now undergoing reconsideration." Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 162. Interestingly, on Pentecost day 2005, the same year *A Generous Orthodoxy* was published, Matthew Fox, a former Dominican priest turned Episcopalian posted a new set of 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany, the same place where Luther had posted his 95 theses that unleashed the Protestant Reformation. See, Matthew Fox, *A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Liederbach, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshipers in and Emerging Culture*, 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 13.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emerging Frontier*, 4-5.

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presented by the fragmented views of the Evangelical community.<sup>11</sup> “On the front end of analysis one could argue that the ECM is merely reacting to a perception of dead religiosity, hoping to breath life into the body of Christ. But a closer analysis shows that its reaction to established ministry and typical church life (what some of them call the ‘modern church’) involve deep theological issues and metaphysical challenges. Its response entails systemic issues much more than mere aesthetic preferences.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Emerging Church leaders the cause of this crisis can be traced back to Evangelical apologetical responses to modern philosophy understood as epistemological foundationalism. Not without reason they blame the rise of the liberal conservative controversy that divides Evangelicals across denominational lines on the Fundamentalist response to Modernity. Liberals responded to modernity by constructing their theological project “upon the foundation of an unassailable religious experience while conservatives look to an error-free Bible as the incontrovertible foundation”<sup>13</sup> for their theological project.

This assessment reveals that both Evangelical and Emerging Church leaders fail to realize that at a deeper and more foundational level the crisis they confront stems from the underdevelopment and limitations of Protestant thought and the failure to produce an alternate synthesis of Christian theology and praxis based on Scripture alone. The very existence of the “Evangelical coalition” flows from and witnesses to this fact. By implication Phyllis Tickle, clearly points to this foundational absence when noting, “American religion had never had a center before, primarily because it was basically Protestant in its Christianity; and Protestantism, with its hallmark characteristic of divisiveness, has never had a center.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Liederbach, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshipers in and Emerging Culture*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Franke, “Generous Orthodoxy and a Changing World: Foreword to *a Generous Orthodoxy*,” in *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-hopful + emergent + unfinished Christian*, ed. Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 134.

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What Protestant leadership was unable to produce laity sought to find on their own around the so-called water cooler conversations during the 80's. Tickle argues that out of these informal conversations taking place in the context of cultural epochal change a center was emerging. "But what was emerging was not longer Protestant. It was no longer any 'thing,' actually. It was simply itself, a *mélange* of 'things' cherry-picked from each quadrant and put together—some would say cobbled together—without any original intention and certainly with no design beyond that of conversation."<sup>15</sup> In the process, dissatisfaction with the *inherited church* grew strong. For many the "inherited church was that from which they had come and to which they, literally, now had no means of returning, let alone any desire at all to do so."<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, by the end of the twentieth century the Evangelical coalition was no longer able to hide the deep theological, ecumenical, and cultural divisions present in both the leadership and laity of American Protestantism.<sup>17</sup> "Evangelical leaders became highly concerned about the future of the evangelical movement, Evangelicals began to look for clarity and unity of focus in the midst of what appeared to be an unwieldy diversity. Questions such as, 'What is evangelicalism?' 'Where is its center?' and 'Where are we going?' began to emerge."<sup>18</sup>

The inner spiritual, theological, and hermeneutical crisis brewing in Evangelicalism during the last two centuries can explain the need and even possibility for epochal change yet, by itself, it cannot explain its generation. Something more was needed to generate an epochal mutation in Evangelical Christianity. Even when we all know that any epochal change involves a multiplicity of interrelated factors, arguably the advent of "postmodernity" provided the trigger to the rise of the Emerging Church.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>17</sup> Commenting on the rise of evangelical diversity during the period that spanned from 1960-1990, Robert Webber concludes that during this period "evangelicalism, became subject to the rise of diversity and branched out in man different ways to address the growing cultural pluralism." Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing The Challenges of the New World*, 33. Diversity spread in the areas of theology, ecumenism and social action.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

### Postmodernity

Prior to and parallel with the growing spiritual, theological, and philosophical dissatisfaction brewing inside the Evangelical movement during the last two decades of the twentieth century epochal changes were taking place at the very core and foundations of Western civilization, which we identify as postmodernism.<sup>19</sup> As the “Emerging Church” label the “postmodern” label is also an umbrella designation<sup>20</sup> involving various issues and levels. For this reason Emerging Church leaders sharing a growing sense that the world as we knew it is changing<sup>21</sup> understand postmodernity also in various ways. Arguably, these changes precipitated the rise of the Emerging Church movement we are considering in this series of articles.

Conservative Evangelicals evaluating the Emerging Church movement correctly point out that to grasp it we need to “identify and understand the underlying ideas and assumptions of what has come to be called the ‘modern’ worldview, which has dominated Western culture for the past few hundred years.”<sup>22</sup> It is also important to become familiar with “the postmodern ideas, which have become dominant in the early twenty-first century.”<sup>23</sup> This being so, let us review briefly two main levels involved in the epochal changes Emerging leaders identify as postmodernity. They are: the cultural and philosophical levels.<sup>24</sup> Since we are exploring the way in which Emerging Church leaders understand postmodernity, in what follows in this section I will quote selectively from them.

Sociologically, “postmodernity” names the cultural mores of western civilization at the turn of the twenty first century. For instance, the term *postmodern*, according to Leonard Sweet, denotes “a 40-year transition from an Information Age to a Bionomic Age that will begin no later than 2020.”<sup>25</sup> Although he likens the force these cultural events unleash to a

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<sup>19</sup> For a brief introduction to the origin and use of the word “postmodernity” as a cultural label see, for instance, Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> For a brief introduction to the history of the term “postmodernity” see, for instance, *ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Liederbach, *The Convergent Church: Missional Worshipers in and Emerging Culture*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture*, 17.

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tsunami, as a tsunami they are of short duration and will be replaced by others in the future. Along the same line and among others, Stanley Grenz identifies, informatics (computer age), centerlessness, pluralism, multivalence, impurity, juxtaposition, eclecticism, the refusal to place “high” art above “pop” art, and, belief in the supernatural and extraterrestrials, as some of the characteristic traits of postmodern culture.<sup>26</sup> These values are embraced, embodied, and disseminated through television and rock music.<sup>27</sup> At the sociological level, then, postmodernism describes western society at the turn of the twenty first century.

Philosophically, “postmodernism” names changes in the area of epistemology. Epistemology is the philosophical discipline that studies the way human beings know what they know especially in the field of scientific research. These changes that were a long time in the making involve the demise of “foundationalism” and the impossibility human beings could experience “objective” and “universal” knowledge. Thus, postmoderns think “the world is not simply an objective given that is ‘out there,’ waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, “they contend that the work of scientists, like that of any other human beings, is historically and culturally conditioned and that our knowledge is always incomplete.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly, this conviction leaves postmodernism without a foundation for universal knowledge, that is, a knowledge that is valid and true for all human beings. To avoid cognitive individualism and the total fragmentation of society postmoderns resort to the “community” or “society” as the basis (foundation) for rational agreements and the

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<sup>26</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 8-9; 19-33.

<sup>27</sup> “The pop culture of our days reflects the centerless pluralism of postmodernity and gives expression to the antinationalism of postmodernism. As evidenced in the cloths they wear and the music they listen to, postmoderns are no longer convinced that their world has a center or that human reason can perceive any logical structure in the external universe. They live in a world in which the distinction between truth and fiction has evaporated. Consequently, they become collectors of experiences, repositories of transitory, fleeting images produced and fostered by the diversity of the media forms endemic in postmodern society.” *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

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definition of values.<sup>30</sup> Of course, by definition, society changes and so will reason and values. Consequently, to achieve some stability, communities need to stand on their own respective traditions. In this way, “regional” truth replaces “universal” truth. Philosophically, then, “postmodernism” names the switch from objective and universal reason to a communitarian and traditional reason.

But postmodernity involves an even more radical change at the metaphysical level few Emerging Church leaders have considered. To appreciate what this change involves we need to bring to mind, briefly, what metaphysics is about and how it relates to theology and the sciences. Let us say that metaphysics is the philosophical discipline that interprets the nature of reality as a whole. As such it includes general and regional ontologies, the former dealing with the general characteristics of any and all things real, and the latter with the general characteristics of specific entities, notably, God, humans, and the world (theology, anthropology and cosmology respectively). Finally, metaphysics also includes the interpretation of the interrelation among all things real (the system of reality as a whole).

To grasp the hermeneutical and methodological role of metaphysics we need to bear in mind that it provides the necessary context for understanding any and everything. As a matter of fact, philosophical, theological, and natural sciences always assume a general interpretation of the nature of the reality or realities they interpret.<sup>31</sup> More specifically, Metaphysics provides the ground for theological and biblical hermeneutics. This being the case, we can easily understand that changes in the interpretation of metaphysical concepts automatically change the content of the assumed principles of interpretation which, in turn, sooner or later will require changes in the way other philosophical sciences, theology, and natural sciences interpret their sources, arrive at their conclusions, and construct their teachings. A minor change in metaphysical concepts may generate broad hermeneutical changes that

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<sup>30</sup> “The postmodern view operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth is dependent on the community in which we participate. Further, and far more radically, the postmodern world view affirms, that this relativity extends beyond our *perceptions* of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate.” Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper and Collins, 1962), Int., 3 (p. 30).



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will reverberate across the sciences and the culture they generate. In short, as Thomas Aquinas remarked, a small error in the metaphysical beginnings could become a large one at the end.<sup>32</sup>

Although a radical rethinking of metaphysics had been underway at least since John Locke's publication of *An Essay on Human Understanding*,<sup>33</sup> it came to full expression and articulation in the work of Martin Heidegger, one of the leading postmodern philosophers. In great detail and with scholarly clarity Heidegger confirmed and further articulated Nietzsche's "overturning of Platonism" which has been the ruling metaphysical view since the beginnings of western civilization.<sup>34</sup> Heidegger calls this the "destruction" and "overcoming" of metaphysics.<sup>35</sup> The "destruction" of metaphysics means the criticism and abandonment of the Platonic–Aristotelic–Augustinian–Thomistic–Kantian–Hegelian–Schleiermacherian traditional approach to philosophy and theology, and, the "overcoming" means a new interpretation of metaphysics Heidegger advanced throughout his many works.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Aquinas agrees, "A small error at the outset can lead to great errors in the final conclusions, as the Philosopher says in I *De Caelo et Mundo* cap. 5 (271b8-13), and thus, since being and essence are the things first conceived of by the intellect, as Avicenna says in *Metaphysicae* I, cap. 6, in order to avoid errors arising from ignorance about these two things, we should resolve the difficulties surrounding them by explaining what the terms being and essence each signify and by showing how each may be found in various things and how each is related to the logical intentions of genus, species, and difference." St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. M.A. Armand Maurer C.S.B, Ph.D., L.M. S. (Toronto, Canada: Garden City Press Co-Operative, 1949), Prologue.

<sup>33</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894).

<sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 1: 200-20. For this reason Alfred North Whitehead appropriately remarked that "the safest general characterization of European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffing and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected ed. (New York, NY: Free Press, 1978), 39.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*: Int., 6 (pp. 41-49). The going back to the forgotten ground of metaphysics may bring about a "transformation of metaphysics" (The Way Back 209-13 passim). This "transformation" or "restoration" of metaphysics was already pointed at in *Being and Time* Introduction, 2.7 as "destruction." Later, in *The Question of Being* (New York: Twayne, 1958) Heidegger calls it "overcoming" (*Überwindung*).

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, *ibid.*, and; ———, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

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To put it briefly, the new metaphysics of postmodernity abandons the notion that real or ultimate reality is timeless<sup>37</sup> and replaces it with the view that real or ultimate reality is temporal and historical.<sup>38</sup> Heidegger understood the magnitude of the changes involved in his metaphysical investigation into the history and nature of metaphysics and expressed it in a series of poignant rhetorical questions. “Do we stand in the very twilight of the most monstrous transformation our planet has ever undergone, the twilight of that epoch in which earth itself hangs suspended? Do we confront the evening of a night which heralds another day? Are we ‘precursors of the day of an altogether different age?’”<sup>39</sup>

In short, even though postmodernity brought about epochal changes in the areas of culture, epistemology and metaphysics Emerging Church leaders and their Evangelical critics have been able so far to relate only to the cultural and epistemological levels seemingly impervious to the deep metaphysical change postmodernity has brought about. This is strange because the epistemological and ontological changes postmodernity has brought about belong together. Moreover, the epistemological changes stand on and correspond to the metaphysical changes. We will come back to this point later.

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<sup>37</sup> Briefly commenting on the beginning of Western philosophy in the fragments of Parmenides Heidegger comments, “What sorts of answers are given to the as yet undeveloped guiding question, the question as to what being is? The *one* answer—roughly speaking, it is the answer of Parmenides—tells us that *being is*. And odd sort of answer, no doubt, yet a very deep one, since that very response determines for the first time and for all thinkers to come, including Nietzsche, the meaning of *is* and *Being*—permanence and presence, that is, the eternal present.” ———, *Nietzsche: 2: 200*. What Heidegger describes from the perspective of his own temporal metaphysics of historicity as “eternal present,” Parmenides described as timeless. Specifically, Parmenides described the meaning of Being by way of various “signs” or characteristics, among them Being “. . . never was, nor will be, because it is now, a whole all together, one, continuous...” Parmenides, “The Way to Truth,” in *Ancilla to the pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), Fgs. 7-8.

<sup>38</sup> “In *Being and Time*, Being is not something other than Time: ‘Time’ is called the first name of the truth of Being, and this truth is the presence of Being and thus Being itself” Martin Heidegger, “The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics,” in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. William Barret and Henry D. Aiken (New York: Random House, 1962), 213-14.

<sup>39</sup> ———, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. Daved Farell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisc, CA: Harper, 1975), 17.

**Embracing Postmodernity?**

Christians have always experienced and shared the gospel from within their diverse and always changing cultural, philosophical, and scientific settings. Why, then, have evangelicals changed their relation to culture from rejection to embrace? Why are Emerging Church leaders more positive about cultural trends, philosophical doctrines, and scientific views than their predecessors? Is there something new and better in the culture and philosophy of our days? Are culture, philosophy, and science coming closer to biblical teachings? More precisely, why do Emerging Church leaders embrace postmodern culture as part of their Christian experience? Finally, we need to ask why most Emerging Church leaders and their Evangelical critics miss the deeper ontological level of the postmodernity.

At the practical level Emerging Church leaders embrace postmodern culture to shape the forms of liturgy and device methods to attract believers to the worship services. An obvious internal motivation for the “turn to culture” is the low attendance to church services. New generations of Evangelicals are not attending Church. Something needs to be done to attract them. According to Philip Clayton “mainline churches are simply not attracting significant proportions of the younger population in America and there are no signs that this pattern is about to change. If for some reason all the persons in mainline churches today who are over the age of sixty-five were to disappear, *two thirds* of current church attendees would be gone.”<sup>40</sup> This indicates that the secularization of western culture that emptied churches in Europe during the twentieth century has finally arrived to America. The pragmatic motivation to fill the churches, however, may be the trigger but not the ground for the Emerging Church’s turn to culture.

I would like to suggest that the grounding reason for the Emerging Church’s embrace of postmodern culture is the charismatization of Protestantism during the second half of the twentieth century we noted in the first article of this series. In other words, the Emerging Church is the logical outcome of the Charismatization of American Evangelicalism. We should keep in mind that “Charismatization” is the label we use to speak about the process of Pentecostalization of Christian worship during

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<sup>40</sup> Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society*, 46.

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the second part of the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> Because Pentecostalism adapted to culture with ease simultaneously attracting large numbers to worship services it became a model for Evangelicals and Catholics alike who eventually adopted and followed the Pentecostal liturgical model. It was through the so-called second (1960's-1970's) and third (1980's) 'waves' of the Holy Spirit that Pentecostal worship permeated most Evangelical denominations producing a Charismatic renewal. Not surprisingly, Charismatism has led mainline churches to adopt "new and informal worship styles, and explosion in 'worship songs,' a new concern for the dynamics of worship, and an increasing dislike of the traditionalism of formal liturgical worship."<sup>42</sup>

The question now becomes, what makes Pentecostalism especially fitted to embrace the cultures and philosophies of the day? To answer this question we should keep in mind the central claim of Pentecostalism that "it is possible to encounter God directly and personally through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is to be known immediately and directly, not indirectly through study of a text."<sup>43</sup> The direct communication of the transcendent God facilitates cultural accommodation because at best it neglects and at worst rejects the principle of divine incarnation in the cultural forms of the words and the human body of Jesus Christ. When the cultural forms of divine revelation presented in Scripture are neglected or rejected cultural accommodation not only ceases to be a problem but it becomes an essential part of Christian experience.

In short, Charismatism stands on the conviction that God relates to humans outside the realm of history and culture. Consequently, culture does not belong to the worship encounter with God but to the doxological and liturgical expressions it generates. This explains why the Emerging Church movement welcomes all cultural forms of liturgical expression as acceptable forms of Christian worship. So we can see that the Emerging Church movement's openness to postmodern culture does

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<sup>41</sup> "The term 'charismatic' is now used to refer to movements within the mainline churches based upon the ideas and experiences of the Pentecostal movement." McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, 419.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 420. "Pentecostalism began a new phase of expansion after the Second World War, paving the way for its massive froth in the second half of the twentieth century. Even in the United States, Pentecostalism has overtaken most of the mainline denominations that dominated the American religious landscape from 1800-1950." *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

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not flow from the specific characteristics of postmodern culture but from the Charismatic openness to human culture.

Readers familiar with modern theology cannot miss the basic coincidence that exists between the Pentecostal conception of worship as encounter and Schleiermacher's theological interpretation of Christian experience. This coincidence is the reason why Pentecostals,<sup>44</sup> Charismatics, and Emerging Christians share the same pluralistic/eclectic approach to biblical interpretation, liturgy, and spirituality; hence, the great resonance that the Emerging Church movement has achieved in a very short time.

At the philosophical level a possible reason why Emerging Church leaders embrace postmodern epistemological relativism and the so-called non-foundationalism advanced by Grenz may be the fact that they help them to justify their rejection of modernity and dismissal of biblical inerrancy and doctrinal authority. Simultaneously, postmodern epistemological relativism helps Emergents to justify the existence of theological disagreements and doctrinal pluralism. In a way, the relativistic version of postmodern epistemology helps to account for the endemic fragmentation of Protestantism through the centuries. Better than that, it shows that Evangelical pluralism and eclecticism was unavoidable. Seen in this light, the Emerging Church may be the best expression of the Evangelical experience.

At the ontological-metaphysical level Emerging Church leaders may be intuitively inclined to neglect and even reject the postmodern ontological turn because it challenges the ground on which tradition stands. As we briefly explained in our previous section, Postmodernity, calls for the rejection and replacement of the ontological-metaphysical system on which Christian theology stands (we will return to this point later in our series).<sup>45</sup> To accept this view implies not only that the

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<sup>44</sup> "Pentecostalism's resonance with postmodernism is probably best seen in the field of biblical interpretation. Pentecostals, while affirming the traditional Protestant notion of the accessibility of the Bible and the right of every believer to interpret this text, stress the multiple dimension of meaning that arise—not on account of the indeterminate nature of the text, but on account of the 'leading of the Spirit' into the nature of the true meaning of the text, which that same Spirit originally inspired." Ibid., 437-38.

<sup>45</sup> Postmodernity "overturns" the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical perspective to ontology and metaphysics on which Christianity has been built, see for, for instance, Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume I: The Will to Power as Art: Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, vol. 1 & 2 (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1979, 1984), I: 200-10.

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metaphysical assumptions of Christian tradition are wrong but also that we should replace them with new ones. To do so unavoidably questions the reliability of tradition and the nature of the Charismatic experience of God as trustworthy foundations for Christian theology and worship.

Additionally, the limited capabilities of postmodern reason seem to indicate that a universal metaphysics might be unreachable. As Emerging Church leaders, together with their Roman Catholic and Evangelical colleagues, built on the “Grand Tradition” they implicitly assume the classical metaphysical framework embraced by the church fathers. This fact may help us to understand their failure to integrate the postmodern ontological turn.

More specifically, Emerging Church leaders may be prone to ignore the postmodern ontological turn because of the domino effect that would follow from abandoning the implicit Platonic ontological foundations of Christian tradition and replacing them with an alternate ontological understanding. Such epochal change in the hermeneutical foundations of Christianity would require an all-inclusive reinterpretation of Christian theological and liturgical traditions. Because these traditions play a central role in the self-identity of Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church movement we can understand why both Evangelical and Emerging Church leaders may not see any practical usefulness in the postmodern ontological turn.

The postmodern ontological turn obviously leads us into an unfamiliar territory most of us seem unwilling to explore. Could it be that this seldom traveled path might open the way back to Christ?

### **Taxonomy of Change**

As our analysis so far indicates, the Emerging Church movement springs from a combination of multiple internal and external factors. Internally, the inherited doctrinal fragmentation of Evangelicalism<sup>46</sup> and the inner sense of dissatisfaction cannot be ignored. Externally, major changes in postmodern culture, epistemology and ontology play a

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<sup>46</sup> Zondervan’s *Counterpoints* series provides a well documented and organized testimony to the theological fragmentation of Evangelicalism at the present time. The following remark that “ambiguities within Scripture’s testimony to providence as well as massive conflicts in world views, then, have led theologians of all ages to advocate diametrically opposed conceptions of providence” seems to apply to other issues and doctrines as well. Dennis W Jowers, “Introduction,” in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 22.

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decisive leading role. Emerging leaders generally agree that the changes they face are massive and epoch making. Their effects will be felt for a long time. Be this as it may, to answer the question about the nature and direction of the changes Evangelicalism is experiencing in the Emerging Church movement we need to analyze in more detail the depth, range, and implications of the changes postmodern culture, epistemology, and ontology are pressing on Evangelicalism in particular and Christianity in general.

Since the decisive leading role of postmodernity takes place at the cultural, epistemological, and ontological levels, it seems reasonable to expect that changes advanced by Emerging Church leaders will involve the same levels. Consequently, we should expect that cultural changes, would generate methodological innovation in ministry and liturgy, epistemological changes would give rise to doctrinal modification, and ontological changes would bring about hermeneutical and systematic revisions.<sup>47</sup> Let us consider each one of these levels, briefly, to better understand the nature and implications of the changes advanced by the Emerging Church movement.

Changes in method produce modifications in the way we do things. Changes in epistemology alter the way in which we understand the origin and nature of the sources on which we base our beliefs. Changes in ontology affect our understanding of the basic ideas we assume to understand the sources of our beliefs. Consequently, in Christian theology, changes in method affect mainly, though by no means exclusively, the area of ministry, mission, and liturgy. Changes in epistemology impact mainly the area of doctrines. Changes in ontology touch mainly the area of understanding and meaning.

Although we distinguish these levels for the purpose of analysis we should in no way imagine they stand asunder or unrelated to each other. All to the contrary, they are intimately interconnected as inseparable components of the complex reality of the church. Thus, for instance, pastors concerned with liturgy and proclamation assume the areas of

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<sup>47</sup> This taxonomy of change coincides and enlarges Ed Stetzer's taxonomy of the Emerging Church movement. His "relevants" (change in liturgical and ministerial methodology), and "revisionists" (change in ecclesiological methodology), belong to my "methodological" level. Stetzer's "revisionists" coincide with my "theological-doctrinal" level. My "hermeneutical" level is implied but not explicitly recognized in Stetzer's "revisionist" level. See, Stetzer, "The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective," 72-73.

doctrines and meaning, in a way similar to theologians who assume ontological foundations and ministerial practice. The intra-systematic relation that exists between them implies that modification in one level or area implies and/or requires changes in the other levels as well. Finally, we should keep in mind that these levels are also helpful for analyzing the different theological disciplines we find in Christian theological seminaries. Let us consider, briefly, each area of change as experienced by representative leaders in the Emerging Church movement and by their Evangelical counterparts.

### **Methodological Change**

For Emerging Church leaders, change in ministerial and liturgical methodology centers in “recovering the gospel from the clutches of a consumer culture” by using postmodern deconstructionist methodologies.<sup>48</sup> At this level, changes in the church take place in the areas of ministry, liturgy, and mission. In these activities Emerging Church leaders want to distance themselves and overcome the practices of the traditional and pragmatic evangelicals of the twentieth century. This level closely relates to the cultural level of postmodern change described above.

The equivalent rubrics “Vintage Christianity”<sup>49</sup> and “Ancient-Future”<sup>50</sup> capture the essence of the methodological level of change in the Emerging Church movement. “Ancient-Future” and “Vintage Christianity” name the method by which emerging leaders face the future with the resources of ancient church traditions. In this sense the Emerging Church movement is conservative even while embracing methodological change.<sup>51</sup> Its application brings the past into the future by

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 56. For an introduction to the postmodern approach to cultural studies and issues, see for instance, Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 145-58.

<sup>49</sup> Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 223.

<sup>50</sup> Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing The Challenges of the New World*, 239-40.

<sup>51</sup> “The truth is that the younger evangelicals are conservative in that they believe the road to the future runs through the past. They definitely are not returning to a fifties past. Instead, they are returning to the Wesleyan past, to the Reformers of the sixteenth century, and to the ancient past of the first three centuries of the church, for inspiration and wisdom.” Ibid., 239.



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“drawing on the wisdom of the ages for the current work of the kingdom.”<sup>52</sup>

As pointed out earlier, dissatisfaction with the apologetical and market driven approaches to ministry by twentieth century Evangelical leadership triggered changes at the methodological level.<sup>53</sup> Emerging church leaders and even some Evangelical leaders<sup>54</sup> believe Postmodern times require them to make deep changes in the method of ministry especially in relation to spirituality and discipleship.<sup>55</sup>

Although one may assume that changes at the methodological level are disconnected with theology and doctrines Robert Webber’s summary of the main components involved in the Emerging Church movement reminds us that such disconnection is impossible. According to him, the main components of Emerging Church change at the methodological level are (1) a missiological understanding of the church, (2) spiritual formation, (3) cultural awareness, and, (4) theological reflection. By explaining that these components are interdependent and mutually condition each other Webber makes clear that any attempt to isolate the methodological level from theological reflection naively ignores reality. He correctly links methodological changes with theological ones. On the one hand, then, the actual content that new methodological views on ministry and liturgy may bring into the church is directly conditioned by the theological ideas pastors assume. On the other hand, to make methodological changes at the ministerial and liturgical levels without simultaneously making changes at the doctrinal-theological level is impossible.

This interconnectedness requires that when considering the methodological level of change advanced by the Emerging Church writers we should keep in mind that they view theology not as the investigation of and the spiritual feeding from Scriptures as the Word of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, Ed Stetzer and Mark Devine suggest Evangelicals should be open to Emerging Church methodological changes that do not challenge the classical doctrines of Evangelicalism. For instance, According to Stetzer, Dan Kimball advancing the vintage church approach to discipleship and spirituality belongs to emerging leaders who do not advance doctrinal changes in their agendas. Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective,” 73. Mark Devine sees the Ancient-Future approach popularized and articulated by Robert Weber as very hopeful feature of the Emerging Church Movement. Devine, “The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams,” 40-42.

<sup>55</sup> Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 213-25.

God. Instead, in harmony with Grenz and Webber, they assume theology to be “a communal reflection on God’s mission that arises out of God’s people as they seek to discern God’s work in history and his present actions in the life of the community.”<sup>56</sup> According to them, it is not the Bible but the deep past of Christian tradition that should open the future of Evangelical Christianity. Additionally, because “the practice of ministry is already theology—theology in action,”<sup>57</sup> Emerging leaders are able to articulate the inner link between classical and modern theological traditions, on one side, and the experiential nature of Charismatic Christianity on the other. They see this combination to be pregnant with possibilities and ecumenical promise. We need to turn our attention, now, to the theological level of change.

### **Theological Change**

The theological and doctrinal level of change in the Emerging Church centers on the role Scripture plays in the understanding of Christian belief and practice. At this level changes take place mainly as reinterpretation of the role of Scripture and the teachings of the church. In this area Emerging Church leaders want to distance themselves and overcome the theological approach of American Evangelicalism during the last two centuries based on the inerrancy of Scripture advanced by the Old Princetonian theologians. This level is deeper than the methodological one and consequently produces a more significant mutation in the Evangelical community. This level closely relates to postmodern changes in epistemology we considered above.

A notable characteristic of the Emerging Church often missed by both their Evangelical detractors and emulators is the focus on theological reflection at the grassroots level. An increasingly educated and sophisticated society wants to know what they believe. They want to know the basis on which pastors teach them what is truth. Emergent leaders are getting the message and responding to the challenge. However, most of them are working at great disadvantage because their Evangelical denominations have prepared them for such a task neither spiritually nor theologically. Besides, many have experienced Christianity as part of their own denominational culture rather than from serious theological and philosophical reflection on biblical teachings.

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<sup>56</sup> Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing The Challenges of the New World*, 241.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

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Doctrines are part of their cultural and religious “inheritance” but not of their thinking and spiritual patterns.

As emerging leaders attempt to explain their beliefs to others they discover the obvious inconsistencies of their own biblical and doctrinal understandings, as well as, the theological divisions existing within the Evangelical community. Moreover, they realize the need to link doctrines, biblical understanding, and experience into a unified net or system of meaning and experience. In their personal and ministerial search for theological meaning they are not prepared to accept without question or explanation dogmatic answers from their mentors or denominations. Instead, they are learning for the first time the exhilarating feeling theological discoveries bring to themselves and the community. Not surprisingly, at times their theological writings resemble a diary of their theological pilgrimage. Brian McLaren’s writings give testimony to this “testimonial” or “conversational” method of doing theology. Such a procedure is more than a way to communicate truth. It is a path leading to the discovery of truths other Christians before them had embraced. As we noted earlier in this series, through this conversational methodology Emerging Church leaders are reaching conclusions on doctrinal issues, like for instance, the Atonement, Justification by Faith, the Kingdom of God, and, Hell that their Evangelical peers regard heretical and therefore unacceptable.

Doctrinal change in the Emerging Church movement, however, goes deeper than mere doctrinal divergence. It involves a paradigmatic shift in the role Scripture plays in the construction of Christian teachings. In her historical and sociological analysis of the origins and direction of the Emerging Church, Phyllis Tickle correctly estimates that at the center of all paradigmatic shifts lay the perennial question of authority.<sup>58</sup> In the Protestant Reformation authority shifted from the Pope to the *sola Scriptura* principle. But Scripture required interpretation that led to denominational and theological fragmentation. And, as we saw earlier, theological fragmentation eventually generated theological and spiritual dissatisfaction.

Throughout the nineteen and twentieth centuries a number of interrelated factors contributed to a progressive questioning of the

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<sup>58</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 45.

viability of the *sola Scriptura* principle among Evangelicals.<sup>59</sup> They caused many of the most diehard Protestants to grow suspicious of the ‘Scripture and scripture only principle.’<sup>60</sup> Besides, in an ecumenical age, Evangelicals are weary of the perennial theological fragmentation of Protestantism and becoming convinced that Christianity couldn’t stand on Scripture alone.<sup>61</sup>

An important factor accelerating the shift from the Protestant *sola Scriptura* as principle of authority to the Roman Catholic spiritual experience guided by tradition principle advanced by the Emerging Church movement is the rise of Pentecostalism. Remarkably, Evangelical responses to the Emerging Church surveyed in an earlier article ignore this factor. However, Phyllis Tickle explains that Pentecostalism directly contradicts the *sola Scriptura* principle of the Reformation thereby providing Emerging Church leaders with a strong religious base to question and dismiss the *sola Scriptura* principle.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Among them for instance, the emergence of evolution (64-66), psychoanalysis (66-68), Heisenberg principle of uncertainty (p. 79), and, the quest for historical Jesus starting in middle eighteenth century (p. 80), Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “We question what the words mean—literally? Metaphorically? Actually? We even question which words do and do not belong in Scripture and the purity of the editorial line of descent of those that do. We begin to refer to Luther’s principle of “*sola scriptura, scriptura sola*” has having been little more than the creation of a paper pope in place of a flesh and blood one. And even as we speak the authority that has been in place for five hundred years withers away in our hands.” Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>61</sup> “Failure to agree on the meaning of Scripture rendered its function as epistemic norm inoperative, thus leading not only to a conflict of interpretations and a plethora of denominations but also to the wars of religion in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries.” Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Tradition”; Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 33.

<sup>62</sup> “Pentecostalism assumes that ultimate authority is experiential rather than canonical. This is *not* either to say or to imply that there is denial of the Holy Scripture. It is to say, rather, that forced into a choice between what a believer thinks with his or her own mind to be said in the Holy Scripture and an apparently contradictory message from the Holy Spirit, many a Pentecostal must prayerfully, fearfully, humbly accept the more immediate authority of the received message. The same thing is true when the contradiction occurs between a received message and the words of a pastor or bishop. Pentecostalism, in other words, offered the Great Emergence its first, solid, applied answer to the question of where now is our authority. Probably just slightly more than a quarter of emergent Christians and the emergent Church are Pentecostal by heritage or affinity, and they have brought with them into the new aggregate this central belief in the Holy Spirit as authority.” Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 85.

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This experiential base fits well with the sheer frustration growing out of centuries of theological fragmentation motivated by the absence of an overall philosophical and theological synthesis of Protestant theology and practice. To Emerging Church leaders this fact unavoidably indicates that a genuine theology from Scripture alone is impossible.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, to overcome theological and ministerial fragmentation a new comprehensive way to do theology had to be found. To this end Pentecostalism became instrumental because by fitting well with the Evangelical experience, modern and postmodern epistemologies, and Roman Catholic theological tradition, it naturally emerged as the efficient cause bringing them together in a new synthesis for a new age.

In this context, the criticism of reason and the non-foundationalist epistemology of postmodernity became scholarly tools Emerging Church leaders use to deconstruct and reject the Evangelical belief in an inerrant Scripture they view as the *sola Scriptura* principle of authority. The same tools point them to the community and its tradition as the new locus of authority for the Church.

The implications of this epistemological change are momentous. They seem to corroborate the rapidly spreading assessment that the changes underway in the Emerging Church movement are of epoch making magnitude.<sup>64</sup> Besides, by accepting tradition and community as the principle of authority the Emerging Church is embracing the same authority on which the Roman Catholic Church stands. This seems to indicate that, at the theological level the Emerging Church movement

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<sup>63</sup> Carl Raschke puts it clearly, “The Bible is not a system of arguable and debatable propositions. A genuine systematic theology forged from the Bible is impossible. The *sola* in *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* is not a qualifiable adverb. As Kierkegaard says, the paradox of the Incarnation demands faith more than assent. For faith is the total surrender of one’s heart, mind, and body to the infinite and Almighty God, who calls us into relation. Scripture is the voice that calls us into that relation.” Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 210.

<sup>64</sup> “The concept of emergence can also be applied to broad and dramatic cultural developments. Phyllis Tickle has recently argued that “emergence” best describes the great shift in human thinking and believing currently underway, a shift she believes will have the same historic status as the Great Reformation and the Great Schism. We are in fact in the middle of what she is calling “The Great Emergence.” Every five hundred years, church and society undergo a major transformation and we happen to be lucky enough to be here to watch this one happen. Post-Christendom, globalization, interconnectivity, and so on, are all dimensions and evidences of this Great Emergence.” Stucky, “Anabaptism and Emergence: Collision or Convergence,” 22.

heralds the end of the Protestant Reformation. Nonetheless, the end is not here yet.<sup>65</sup>

Initial Evangelical reactions to the Emerging Church movement considered in an earlier article indicate that the strongest Evangelical opposition to the Emerging Church focuses precisely on the role of Scripture in theological construction. However, Tickle thinks history is on the side of the Emerging Church movement away from the *sola Scriptura* principle. She predicts the eventual demise of the *sola Scriptura* principle.<sup>66</sup> A new principle of authority will emerge. Yet, when we realize that the alternative to the *sola Scriptura* principle is tradition and community it is difficult to envision them as “new” principle of authority. Instead, it seems that the “old” Roman Catholic principle from which the Reformation emerged is carrying the day after five centuries of controversy. But, even if the Emerging Church may come to define the new Evangelical center from tradition instead than from Scripture, thereby bringing the Protestant Reformation to an end, would there a remnant of biblical Protestantism survive?

### **Hermeneutical Change**

The hermeneutical level of change in the Emerging Church centers on the role that philosophy plays in the interpretation of Scripture and the understanding of Christian beliefs and practices. At this level changes take place mainly as reinterpretation of the basic ontological and metaphysical ideas exegetes, theologians, and ministers assume when they engage in their respective trades. In this area Emerging Church leaders seek for the interpretive perspective they need to construct their

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<sup>65</sup> “For so long as it does, however, the debate among the contending candidates for the right of final authority will be a major as well as a bitter one. It is nonetheless possible to sketch in with broad strokes where the argument is and something of the battleground on which it will be fought.” Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 148.

<sup>66</sup> “When it is all resolved—and it most surely will be—the Reformation’s understanding of Scripture as it has been taught by Protestantism for almost five centuries will be dead. That it is not to say the Scripture as the base for authority is dead. Rather it is to say that what the Protestant tradition has taught about the nature of that authority will be either dead or in mortal need of reconfiguration.” *Ibid.*, 101. Actually, Tickle predicts that the death of the *sola Scriptura* principle will take place when Evangelicals lose the battle on homosexuality. The gay fight is the last one. “Of all fights, the gay one must be—has to be—the bitterest, because once it is lost, there are no more fights to be had. It is finished. Where now is the authority?” *Ibid.*

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theological and ministerial views. Because it guides their conclusions, the hermeneutical level of change is deeper even than the theological and methodological ones. In spite of its grounding role, most Evangelical and Emerging Church leaders fail to directly and critically engage with the ontological and metaphysical issues the hermeneutical level involves. The few of them that do engage with ontological issues attempt to broaden the traditional perspectives main line Protestantism and American Evangelicalism embraced throughout their histories. This level closely relates to the ontological level of postmodern change described above.

Robert Webber testifies to the existence of an anti-philosophical bias in American Fundamentalism. The “all you need is the Bible” appropriation of the *sola Scriptura* principle translated in the absence of philosophical education in Evangelical seminaries.<sup>67</sup> Neo-Evangelical pragmatism did not do much to revert this state of affairs. Emerging Church leaders, then, react against the Evangelical neglect of the philosophical foundations of their faith. By so doing they grant a positive role to philosophy that contradicts the *sola Scriptura* principle on which Evangelicalism stands.

As we enter the hermeneutical level of analysis a fateful methodological inconsistency within Evangelicalism comes to view. On one side, what appears to be a large number of Evangelicals believe their doctrines and hermeneutical principles stand on the basis of Scripture alone. Wayne Grudem, an often quoted representative of this approach, maintains that “systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic.”<sup>68</sup> Within his methodological matrix, the role of philosophy in systematic theology is minimal. “Philosophical study helps us understand right and wrong thought forms common in our culture and

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<sup>67</sup> “This was true of my fundamentalist college education, which was marked by a distinct negative attitude toward things intellectual. For example, the fundamentalist school where I was educated did not have a philosophy department because ‘all you need is the Bible.’ They offered one course in philosophy to meet state requirements for students in the educational department, but this was a course designed to show why all philosophical speculation was foolish and should be avoided.” *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 21.

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others.<sup>69</sup> On the other side, a large sector of leading Evangelical theologians believes that their understanding of Christian doctrines stand on a multiplicity of theological sources among which philosophy and science play important hermeneutical roles.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, both Emerging Church and neo-Evangelicals leaders agree in their disapproval of Grudem's approach. From the Emerging Church perspective Stanley Grenz sees it as sidestepping the thorny issues of tradition, culture, and method.<sup>71</sup> From the neo-Evangelical viewpoint John Blot argues against Grudem's approach with the express purpose of battling against Carl Raschke's philosophical position we will explore in the next article. According to Bolt "evangelical theological method should not be restricted to summarizing biblical doctrine. Such an understanding of the theological task today fails as claim to *truth* about God, a universal claim desperately needed today."<sup>72</sup>

These confronted positions beg the question about whether neo-evangelicals embrace the *sola Scriptura* principle as the principle of authority in doctrinal and practical matters. If they do, then, we are facing the existence of different views of understanding the same principle. Be it as it may, we cannot dismiss either position by using slogans and labels. They require careful reflection, especially for Evangelicals facing epochal change in this generation.

The agreement between neo-Evangelicals and Emerging Church leaders about the multiplicity of theological sources is momentous and has a long history. Arguably, the Evangelical theological synthesis articulated by Luther and Calvin never stood on the *sola Scriptura* principle but rather implicitly on the multiplicity of sources matrix.<sup>73</sup> Their implicit dependence on Greek ontological categories did not affect

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Donald A.D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), See for instance, Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1991).

<sup>71</sup> Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Bolt, "Sola Scriptura as an Evangelical Theological Method?," 89.

<sup>73</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 244-52. This book correctly argues that the Reformers did not use Scripture independently from tradition as interpretive principle. What neo-Evangelicals call *sola Scriptura* Mathison characterizes as *solo Scriptura*. According to him, theology cannot stand on *solo Scriptura* because this procedure takes a common interpretive viewpoint. Consequently, it leads to private interpretations creating theological and ecclesiological fragmentation.



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only peripheral issues or the “communication” of the gospel to their culture. On the contrary, as Bruce McCormack as correctly underlined the implicit assumption of Greek ontological categories also conditioned their understanding of the central doctrine of Justification,<sup>74</sup> the doctrine on which the church stands or falls.<sup>75</sup>

As they drew heavily on Augustine their theological synthesis unintentionally assumed the general ontological and metaphysical principles of Neo-Platonism a reality neo-Evangelicals tend to deny strongly. Perhaps the so-called Radical Reformation came closer to building on the *sola Scriptura* principle, yet, it never generated a philosophical and theological synthesis. However, the continuity of Protestant theology with medieval Roman Catholic Theology transpired soon after the reformation during the period of Protestant Orthodoxy (1560-1620) when Protestant theologians adopted scholastic methodology strongly influenced by Aristotle’s philosophical thought<sup>76</sup> and the medieval theological tradition heavily committed to Greek ontological categories.<sup>77</sup> These simple historical facts cast suspicion over

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<sup>74</sup> Recently Bruce L. McCormack has recognized that Luther and Calvin “... were not in a position to explore the ‘*theological ontology*’ that was implied in their understanding of justification. And this left their articulation of the doctrine vulnerable to criticism” Bruce L. McCormack, “What’s at Stake in Current Debates over Justification?,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 104. He suggests that Calvin was unwilling to address the ontological questions directly *ibid.* Correctly, McCormack assesses the lack of ontological reflection as a serious weakness in Protestant Theology. “The problem with refusing to engage ontological questions as an essential part of the dogmatic task is that we all too easily make ourselves the unwitting servants of the ontology that is embedded in the older theological rhetoric that we borrow—an so it was with Calvin.” *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Luther, “The Disputation Concerning Justification,” in *Career of the Reformer*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz, *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1960), Introduction.

<sup>76</sup> Alister McGrath, “Reformation to Enlightenment,” in *The Science of Theology*, ed. Paul Avis, *The History of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 154-55.

<sup>77</sup> “In their attempt to show that the Protestant tradition was a consistent and defensible interpretation of the catholic tradition, the Protestant thinkers of the post-Reformation era had recourse both to the great medieval systems of Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and others, and to the ongoing philosophical tradition (J. Zabarella, F. Suárez) that linked them to those systems. Protestant Scholasticism, however, should not be viewed as identical with the medieval systems nor as a reduplication of the theology of the Reformers. Granting developments in logic, rhetoric and metaphysics which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Protestant Scholasticism was ‘a form of Protestant theology in its own right’ (R.A. Müller).” Willem J. van Asselt, “Protestant Scholasticism” in *The*

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the neo-Evangelical claim that its doctrines spring from the *sola Scriptura* principle.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps neo-Evangelicalism owes more to the Radical Reformation than to the Magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin.<sup>79</sup> And yet, they are also dependent on the latter for their main doctrinal trusts.

Be it as it may, this context helps us understand why John Bolt, a critic of the Emerging Church approach to theology, questions whether “the Reformational slogan *sola Scriptura* is an appropriate *methodological* framework for evangelical systematic theology today.”<sup>80</sup> Finding it to be “unduly restrictive” and “potentially harmful to the proclamation of the gospel’s truth” he argues that an appropriate approach to theological method “must also be characterized by an explicit metaphysics that though it cannot arise directly from the biblical data—the Bible is not a book of metaphysics—is nonetheless consistent with Scripture and perhaps even coinheres with it.”<sup>81</sup> Viewing *sola Scriptura* as a “necessary but no sufficient condition for Christian theology” Bolt proceeds to show correctly that “our greatest theologians—from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Francis Turretin to Herman Bavinck—where no strict biblicists in their theologizing but also serious metaphysicians.”<sup>82</sup> Ironically, on this point, Bolt agrees with Carl Raschke, an Emerging Church thinker who also believes that “a genuine Systematic theology forged from the Bible is impossible.”<sup>83</sup>

However, Bolt’s thrust is not against neo-Evangelical biblicists as Grudem who fail to recognize “the role of confessional and philosophical presuppositions.”<sup>84</sup> Instead, his lengthy scholarly evidentiary exposition

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*Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 512.

<sup>78</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), Introduction. Bolt, “*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?”

<sup>79</sup> On this point see, for instance, Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 131.

<sup>80</sup> Bolt, “*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?,” 62.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 210.

<sup>84</sup> According to Bolt a strictly biblical doctrinal method “fails to do justice to the broader human experience of God outside the church, overlooks the key role of the church itself in any normative interpretation of Scripture, avoids addressing the key role of confessional and philosophical presuppositions, and does not account for theology’s need to be contemporary, relevant, and able to speak to the issues of ‘today.’” Bolt, “*Sola*

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on the use of classical metaphysics by influential representatives of the Christian Evangelical tradition is designed to argue against the postmodern relativism of the Emerging Church movement.

Bolt sees the revival of classical metaphysical and epistemological views he proposes as the indispensable antidote to Carl Raschke's postmodern proposal that "the entire Evangelical faith must be *dehellenized*"<sup>85</sup> and the propositional view of Scripture abandoned. Rasche's new "*dehellenized*" metaphysics, he has drawn from Lévinas,<sup>86</sup> supports a functional/sacramental view of Scripture according to which the words of the Bible mediate the believer's encounter with the infinite One.<sup>87</sup> Bolt correctly perceives the hermeneutical effects that Rasche's attack on classical metaphysics has on the traditional propositional view of biblical inspiration and theology. To respond to the Emerging Church postmodern assault on the propositional view of Scripture Bolt calls Evangelicals' attention to the hermeneutical role of classical metaphysics and epistemology.

Underneath the conflict of biblical interpretations, therefore, we find a deeper conflict of metaphysical interpretations. This is the level and the question Aquinas had in mind when he stated that a small error in the beginning is a large one at the end. The ontological ideas we implicitly or explicitly assume condition not only our view of inspiration but also the interpretation of Scripture and the construction of Christian doctrines. Change at the ontological level, then, is the foundation on which doctrinal and methodological changes stand.

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*Scriptura as an Evangelical Theological Method?,"* 89.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 91; Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, 131-34.

<sup>86</sup> ———, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*: 139.

<sup>87</sup> "In the postmodernist argot we can say that Scripture is not a system of 'facts' but 'traces' of the divine fullness. Claims about biblical 'facts' are idolatrous claims to ultimacy. Traces are the medium through which the ultimate and infinite exhibits itself in a penultimate and finite manner as ultimate and infinite. The trace is a finite signal that the infinite One has been there. And if the infinite One has been there, the 'fact' becomes far less of an issue. Inerrancy is an idolatry of the text. It is bibliolatry plain and simple, inasmuch as it cannot see beyond the logical lattice of the text to encounter the Other who is ever calling us into his kingdom and before his throne." Ibid., 135.

### **Conclusion**

The all too partial survey of selected evidence presented in this article suggests that the changes American Evangelicalism is experiencing at the beginning of the twenty first century are not superficial but deep and paradigmatic touching its nature and destiny. These changes stem from deep grass-roots dissatisfaction with the spiritual, doctrinal, and ministerial status of Evangelical denominations. Because Evangelical theology and ministry are not reaching young generations of churchgoers their growing dissatisfaction goes far beyond aesthetic issues to include theological, metaphysical, and systemic topics. This situation uncovers a long crisis of theological and ministerial leadership that can be traced back at least to the failure to produce a theological synthesis of Biblical philosophy and theology that could answer the questions and challenges presented by classical philosophies and modern science.

While the Evangelical experience is slowly but surely cracking under the pressure of inner spiritual, theological, and hermeneutical crises, the world around it is crumbling under the pressure of philosophical, scientific, and technological changes. Without inner or external anchors to guide its destiny and mission rapid changes threaten to further fragment the never cohesive existence of the Evangelical movement.

To save Protestantism and advance its mission Emerging Church leaders believe, unlike their predecessors, that Evangelicals should let go of the Bible and reason as their anchors and embrace postmodern social, epistemological changes. In their minds this amounts to the postmodern reformation of the Church even the next reformation. In this process the Protestant Reformation based on Scripture appears to be vanishing before our eyes.

Is there an alternate way to face the challenges that in our days Modernity and Postmodernity level against Protestantism and Christianity at large? Is there a path (method) that could lead to the formulation of the elusive synthesis of Biblical Christian theology and practice? Could it be that besides the way back to tradition advanced by the Emerging Church and Roman Catholicism, a way back to Scriptures, made possible by a renewed understanding of the Protestant *sola Scriptura* principle, is also possible? To this end we need to briefly review the philosophical foundations of the Emerging Church movement.

*CANALE: EMERGING CHURCH*

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