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“THE EMERGING CHURCH”

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Heretical, misguided, the demise of the church, and worldly are just a few of the terms that have been used by many prominent bloggers, pastors and writers¹ across the country to describe this new wave of loosely affiliated postmodern Christ-followers collectively deemed the Emerging Church. The concern surrounding this new movement of Christians has continued to increase since the turn of the 21st century as allegations surrounding their view of Scripture, propitiation, the Gospel, and truth has proliferated. Many are calling this movement an apostate sect within the church that is working to split the church down the middle², while others see it as a heretical virus that seeks to pick off believers one at a time converting them over to the dark side of postmodern thought and practice while tossing Scripture, the gospel and Jesus aside with relative ease³. Caught reeling by the quick and immediate exposure of the Emerging Church, the church has lashed out at this new Emerging Movement in both appropriate and inappropriate ways sparking a debate that has done nothing more than draw hard and fast lines of separation instead of bringing it together. This reaction to the Emerging Church is fueled by assertions made by prominent authors and statisticians that the church's only hope of

¹ Weblogger and Christian Radio Host Ingrid Schleuter of *Slice of Laodicea* (<http://sliceoflaodicea.com>), D. A. Carson, professor and author of *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Chuck Smith Jr., lead pastor of the Calvary Chapel Outreach Movement, are just a couple of initial critics whom will be discussed throughout this paper as well as a slew of others to come.

² Ingrid Schleuter, <http://sliceoflaodicea.com/>

³ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004)

survival is through a new monastic movement⁴ of organically driven and cultivated churches that follow a commitment to the ethos of postmodern thought employed as found in the Emerging Church.⁵

The Emerging Church began in the late 1990's with the inception of a Young Pastor's conference organized by Bob Buford and the Leadership Network to rally together young and emerging church leaders to discuss the changing climate of culture and the church's necessary response. It was at this conference that a young church planter named Mark Driscoll⁶ spoke about "The Flight from God" describing the emerging culture of postmodernism. Driscoll concludes⁷ that it was this sermon that launched a national platform for him and for the Young Leaders Network⁸ to travel, gain exposure, and communicate the shifting culture to the masses.

As the platform for the Young Leaders Network grew, Leadership Network stepped in to hire Doug Pagitt to lead this new emerging group of voices and leaders. It was during this time that the network experienced a name change from Young Leaders Network to Terra Nova and leaders such as Tony Jones, Brian McLaren, Chris Seay and Dan Kimball were brought into the fold. With these new and influential voices now joining the mix Driscoll states that the dialogue shifted from attempting to understand the emerging postmodern culture to infusing postmodernism into traditionally held

⁴ George Barna, *Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)

⁵ Organically cultivated churches are those that do not have a hierarchical structure, but rather are built from the ground up in a non-formal environment based around affinity rather than location and/or building. These church communities are mainly implemented as house churches. Neil Cole, *Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

⁶ Mark Driscoll is the Lead and Founding Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington.

⁷ Driscoll takes full credit for being the one to launch the Emerging Church in his book *The Radical Reformation* that was published in 2004 and has re-stated it again as recently as September 21, 2007 in a lecture given at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. No one has stood up within the Emerging Church to refute or challenge this assertion.

⁸ Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 15-16.

theological assumptions and beliefs. Due to this shift a major disagreement erupted between Mark Driscoll and Terra Nova which caused Driscoll to pull away from the network altogether⁹. Shortly thereafter, Dan Kimball renamed the movement “The Emerging Church” and Emergent Village was birthed.¹⁰

In March of 2001, Brian D. McLaren’s revolutionary tale of Neo and a struggling pastor hit the book shelves to wide acclaim arguably becoming the most influential and engaging entry point for many into the Emerging Church while vaulting McLaren onto the center stage as the major thinker and writer of Emergent Village and the Emerging Church.¹¹ Due to the release of this book, the Emerging Church has garnered a great deal of attention and scrutiny by Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church was solidified as a viable and important movement at the turn of the century.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify and distinguish the differences that are emerging from within the Emerging Church Movement. Although The Emergent Village was the catalyst for this movement, it is only one of three different streams that make up the entirety of the Emerging Church movement. Spawning forth from the same ethos, yet manifesting itself in different practice and thought from The Emergent Village are the Relevants, Reformers, and Revisionists.¹²

Relevants are experimenters with “Church 2.0” as they mainly focus on enhancing the atmosphere within the traditional confines of the worship service. The

⁹ In the September 21, 2007 edition of Christianity Today, Doug Pagitt says in regards to the differences between Driscoll and Emergent, "I think much of our difference comes from the fact that in many ways we are telling different stories of Christianity."

¹⁰ Driscoll laid out the developmental history of the Emerging Church in a lecture given at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 21, 2007.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 157.

¹² Mark Driscoll lays out these distinguishing marks in his lecture on the Emerging Church at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 21, 2007.

Relevants are mainly the ones responsible for bringing in new forms of music, reintroducing candles into the worship center, re-connecting with ancient traditions, or simply altering the set-up of the worship space as outlined in Dan Kimball's book *The Emerging Church*¹³. Many of the Relevants have fallen in line with the philosophy behind Sally Morgenthaler's¹⁴ assumptions on worship as an effective evangelistic outreach. Relevants still hold onto orthodox, evangelical beliefs but are more concerned with communicating those beliefs in a relevant and meaningful manner for today's postmodern, pluralistic culture.

Reformers often embody many of the same values as the Relevants in their experimentation of atmospheric enhancement within the confines of the worship service; however, they go one step further by challenging long-held assumptions that are used to guide and organize the church structure. The Reformers are experimenting with new forms of church through new monastic communities that may or may not have a centralized leadership,¹⁵ small bands of house churches and Life Transformation Groups.¹⁶ Alan Hirsch writes in *The Forgotten Ways*¹⁷ that these new monastic

¹³ Vintage Faith, the church that Dan Kimball currently pastors in Santa Cruz, California, drastically alters their worship setting from week to week by relocating the worship team around the room instead of on stage. They also are known to use different sources for lighting in their worship gatherings and arrange the seating so that it has a more communal feel. (Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.) Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota and pastored by Doug Pagitt also utilizes the same techniques in worship as they have couches set up in the round, the worship team off to the side and the teaching pastor sets up in the middle of the circle on a stool. They too utilize different sources for lighting in their worship gatherings and attempt to create a more communal feel in their gatherings. (Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.)

¹⁴ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

¹⁵ In his book *Revolutionaries*, Barna labels this group as the future of the church based upon his statistics and research. Arguably the most recognized new monastic community is The Simple Way in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania led by Shane Claiborne. This group lives within a largely rundown area of the city and lives in an incarnational way among the people of the neighborhood. His story is detailed in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*.

¹⁶ Life Transformation Groups are small groups that get together to intensely study the Bible together, holding each other accountable and seeking to live out their faith in radical everyday ways. These groups are based upon Neil Cole's book *Cultivating a Life for God* (Grand Rapids: Churchsmart Resources, 1999).

communities are the future of the church much like took place in China throughout the 20th century. Like Hirsch, there are other Reformers within the existing traditional structures of the church who challenge and push the boundaries of ecclesiology by helping the church regain a connection with ancient traditions of the faith and integrate them into the rhythms of their faith community. In addition to this, the main undergirding principle of the Reformers is attentiveness towards a missional faith and theology where, instead of attracting people and waiting for the un-churched to come to them, they are focused on going into the community to make a difference on many different levels. It is a fundamental shift in evangelistic philosophy that guides the Reformers¹⁸.

The third stream, and the most well known is the Revisionists. The Revisionist stream agrees with the Relevants and the Reformers but seeks to take things yet another step forward and seemingly throw everything into a state of question and a state of flux. The Revisionists are seen as those that question tried and tested doctrines of Scripture, Trinity, Substitutionary Atonement, the Eternal Destination of Hell and others. The Revisionists mainly include those who are prominent within the Emergent Village¹⁹ and are the most widely recognized within the Emerging Church. Many²⁰ believe that this stream is, in fact, the only thrust and encompasses the entirety of the Emerging Church Movement; however this is an incorrect viewpoint.

¹⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007)

¹⁸ Mark Driscoll believes that the Reformer stream is made up solely of newly Reformed Theologians and is the thrust behind the new Calvinist team. Driscoll asserts that the Reformers are bringing about a call to return to expositional Biblical Teaching throughout the country.

¹⁹ Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, and Brian McLaren would generally be categorized as the main proponents of Revisionism and are often castigated by evangelicalism for their perceived heresy.

²⁰ D. A. Carson *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); John MacArthur *The Truth War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

The main assumption of this paper is that the Emerging Church is the whole of which the Emergent Village is only a part. It is improper to consider the Emergent Village as the entirety of the Emerging Church whereas it is only a small segment of the population that encompasses the Emerging Church. Emergent Village may be the most prominent voice, but it is not the voice for all within this movement and careful consideration must be paid to not paint with broad strokes everyone who is in the Emerging Church movement as Emergent nor as a Revisionist. In turn, this paper will walk through the scope of the Emerging Church as a convergence of the three streams and evaluate this entirety rather than one particular stream.

Contrary to those who say the Emerging Church constitutes the erosion of Biblical Christianity, the death of Truth and a resurgence in heresy among post-moderns; truth and Biblical Christianity are still alive and well in the Emerging Church. There are many differences between the Emerging Church and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism in the modes of communication, understanding of the scope of truth, missional theology and the broadness of the gospel, however these differences should not give us permission to cast aside adherents to this movement as heretics and apostates but rather we should continue to embrace them as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

CHAPTER 1: THE TRUTH WAR

As postmodern thought burgeons into the cultural norm it brings with it a set of challenges that the church must begin to deal with in order to effectively reach out to and share the gospel within attempts to further the Kingdom in today's world.

Postmodernism marks a new way of viewing reality and interacting within the world.

According to Stanley Grenz:

Postmoderns denounce the pretense of those who claim to view the world from a transcendent vantage point from which they are able to speak imperiously to and on behalf of all humankind...all claims to truth—and ultimately even truth itself—are socially conditioned.²¹

Although modernism views this paradigmatic shift as the ultimate destruction of truth and the abolition of absolutes, which in turn leads us down the paths of pluralism and relativism, the Emerging Church sees this deep shift not only as a necessary change but as one of survival if the church is to continue on in any meaningful and relevant way. At a recent lecture given at Dominican University²², Brian McLaren said that the explosion of truth is neither a denial of truth nor the cessation of its existence; rather he is saying that there is more truth out there than we are willing to recognize. The reality of our modern condition is that we have locked ourselves into a comfortable zone of our own understanding and blind ourselves to the rest of the story. We need to step outside of our

²¹ Grenz, Stanley. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. pg. 38.

²² "Truth-Telling in Christian America: Globalization, Poverty and the Environment," October 16, 2007. Dominican University.

boxes of truth and take a hard look at the possibilities that surround us in order to truly experience ultimate reality where God dwells in all of his fullness and Truth²³.

McLaren's assertion is that modernism is too narrow in its dealings with truth, which cannot possibly be fully understood, let alone mastered. The project of modernism sees things otherwise. Rene Descartes in *A Discourse on Method*²⁴ created a logical series of principles known as foundationalism. These principles paved the way for modernism by erecting an intellectual framework that promised an absolute, objective, and universally accessible certainty of truth. The fundamental shift between modernism and postmodernism is the belief or disbelief that truth can be fully grasped. The reverberations of this shift are what we are experiencing today between traditional orthodox evangelicalism and the Emerging Church.

A direct result of this shift is the claims to heresy levied upon McLaren and others that are a part of the Emerging Church movement. The immediate conclusion is the denial of truth as understood by traditional orthodox evangelicalism and a venture towards relativism and pluralism in which truth exists in a state of contradiction and opposing dichotomies. Truth, therefore, is rendered utterly useless. Traditional orthodox evangelicalism comes to a completely logical conclusion based upon their understanding of truth created by Descartes and pushed forth by modernism.

The truth box that has been created by Descartes and his principles of foundationalism effectively creates an infrastructure of logic for traditional orthodox evangelicalism, which is then placed upon God's revelation of Scripture. This has led to

²³ The capitalization of Truth in this sentence is purposeful to show the difference between the modern version of truth (as captured in little boxes) and the postmodern version of truth (as experienced with the fullness of ultimate reality where God dwells). This in no way is to suggest that God does not dwell in the truth of modernism, but rather to show that there is more to the story than what modernism claims.

²⁴ Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method* (1637) (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

the formulation of *Sola Scriptura*, or Scripture Alone, as the sole basis of the entirety of God’s revealed Truth to the world—also known as Special Revelation.

McLaren and the Emerging Church, do believe that God has revealed truth through special revelation as given to us in Scripture, however they also acknowledge that God has revealed his truth through natural revelation²⁵ as well. McLaren and the Emerging Church are not advocating a dualistic, competing reality of truth nor are they advocating the idea that everything is truth. Rather, their fundamental assertion, which maintains similarities with postmodern epistemology but lay more closely tied to Natural Revelation, is that Truth is everywhere but not everything is truth.²⁶ The Emerging Church looks beyond the traditional orthodox understandings of *Sola Scriptura* and allows the truth that has been revealed by God through natural means, man’s inherent nature and logic to inform their present understanding of ultimate reality—Truth. Rob Bell, the Teaching Pastor and Founding Pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan had this to say:

“We should affirm truth wherever we find it, whoever speaks it, and however it comes across. If it’s true, I affirm it because all things are mine. We should fear no truth because if it is true it is of God and Christ is of God and I am of Christ. We claim truth!”²⁷

This is the explosion of truth that McLaren was speaking about, that Rob Bell affirms and the traditional orthodox evangelicalism finds so dangerous.

The view of truth asserted by the Emerging Church resembles the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that looks for truth in the balance between Natural Revelation and Special

²⁵ The loci of natural revelation are fourfold: 1) Nature 2) History 3) Human Moral Consciousness 4) Man’s Religious Nature.

²⁶ I first heard this statement in January of 2004 at the Poets, Prophets, and Preachers conference at Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan by Rob Bell.

²⁷ Bell said this at the Poets, Prophets, Preachers conference in reference to 1 Corinthians 3.18-23

Revelation by seeking a balance between Tradition, Scripture, Reason and Experience. However, they take it a step further. The Emerging Church looks beyond the box of truth as created by Descartes and believes that pieces of truth can also be found in other religions and practices, in nature and science, in politics and philosophy, as well as a number of other disciplines and realms that exist in our world. Truth, therefore, is no longer locked solely into the box of *Sola Scriptura* but has been freed in order to see the fullness of God's revelation in both Natural and Special means. These other pieces of truth located outside of Special Revelation are not in place to pull us away from God and his revealed truth, but rather they serve to enlighten our understanding of ultimate reality by bringing into focus the fullness of Truth as found in the balance between Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience. The Emerging Church believes that Truth is found beyond categorization and we as a church need to ascend this mountain of truth, moving beyond the cubby-holed views in which we presently entrench ourselves. If God is Truth, then Truth is much bigger than we realize. If Truth is absolute and much bigger than we realize then we cannot expect to get our arms around it to the extent that we can fully know Truth.

Peter Rollins takes this notion and paints a word-picture of this explosion of truth to explain that when we bind our conceptual ideas to a box without looking elsewhere we in turn do nothing but create an idol for our own purposes and desires:

Theology, in its modern form, has been concerned with upholding and defending the notion of orthodoxy as that which articulates a correct understanding of God [in a complete way]. Yet the idea that we may understand the source of faith in this way has been roundly attacked both by those outside the Church and by those within it. The argument is made that naming God is never really naming God but only naming our understanding of God. To take our ideas of the divine and hold

them as if they correspond to the reality of God is thus to construct a conceptual idol built from the materials of our mind.²⁸

Many critics of the Emerging Church will point to this position on truth as proof of its relativistic nature with the end result being a heretical movement.²⁹ However, this is nothing more than moving beyond our categorization and disallowing the limitation of God. To combat this charge of heresy levied upon the Emerging Church, Rollins says.

Here I picture the emerging community as a significant part of a wider religious movement which rejects both absolutism and relativism as idolatrous positions which hide their human origins in the modern myth of pure reason... the emerging community is helping us to rediscover the more Hebraic and mystical notion of the orthodox Christian as one who believes in the right way—that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike (sic) manner. The reversal from ‘right belief’ to ‘believing in the right way’ is in no way a move to some binary opposite of the first (for the opposite of right belief is simply wrong belief); rather, it is a way transcending the binary altogether. Thus orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world.³⁰

Rollins leaves us looking towards interaction with the world, an interaction with culture as opposed to viewing the world as something to stand a part from. This is the result of taking seriously Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”³¹

Fundamentally this view of Truth boils down to two different understandings about God. Instead of asserting that God is incapable of revealing his Truth through different avenues and means other than *Sola Scriptura*, which ultimately means the

²⁸ Peter Rollins, *How(Not) To Speak of God*, (Massachussets: Paraclete Press, 2006), 2.

²⁹ In the introduction of John MacArthur’s book *The Truth War* (pg. x-xi) he sees the Emerging Church’s view of truth as an attack on truth and ultimately a hatred for truth itself. He says, “Every true Christian should know and love the truth.... The clear implication is that a genuine love for the truth is built into saving faith.... In an age when the very idea of truth is being scored and attacked (even within the church, where people *ought* to revere the truth most highly)....

³⁰ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God*, p. 2-3

³¹ Matthew 6.10 (*Today’s New International Version of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.)

Church's interpretation of *Sola Scriptura*, we need to ask the question "Why cannot God reveal his Truth in any way he wants to?" Why would God limit himself to only Scripture and the Church when there are people and people groups that will never have access to either one throughout the course of their lives?

It is certain that God will reveal his Truth to whomever he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants, wherever he wants and to maintain otherwise is to believe that we can somehow control God by limiting him to our own logic and our own understanding no matter how limited or limiting that may be. This view of Truth as proposed by the Emerging Church is not an easy one to swallow when taken in conjunction with modern epistemology. Modern epistemology has given rise to a love for and a desire to locate everything, both logical and illogical, within categories and spheres of mastered understanding. By utilizing such a logical organizational structure we are then able to feel as if we can truly grasp and understand something thus relieving ourselves from living in the tension of uncertainty. It is, therefore, only logical that we would try and employ the same strategy when dealing with God and Truth. Yet this is the dilemma of modernism—the belief that one can completely grasp and understand something that is completely incapable of being fully understood and/or grasped. The Emerging Church strives to live faithfully to God within that tension of uncertainty and because of their unwillingness to compromise on their position of the ungraspable nature and reality of God and Truth, a rather controversial dilemma has arisen within the church at large.

It is thus, this fundamental epistemological difference that prevents the Emerging Church and traditional orthodox evangelicalism from reconciling. Because of this

epistemological distinctive the Emerging Church looks at doctrine and theology through a different lens preferring to use belief as “a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world.”³² However, this distinctive and approach to doing theology does not detract from nor alter traditional orthodox theologies that have been held for centuries.

³² Peter Rollins. *How (Not) To Speak of God*. p. 3

CHAPTER 2: DOING THEOLOGY

Theology, long mired in a static, rote state due to the project of modernism is no longer stuck in the moment but has now been freed and given way to be fully explored due to the emergence of postmodern epistemology. To this end, the Emerging Church is taking full advantage as it strives to once again make theology accessible to the typical person much in the same way Martin Luther made the Scriptures available to the typical person through the Reformation. It has been stated on more than one occasion that the Emerging Church holds within it the potential of being the ‘Second Reformation’³³ for the church as a new revolution emerges from its ranks.

This divergence from modern epistemology and the rise in belief that ‘truth is everywhere’³⁴ has encouraged the Emerging Church to view theology not as an ultimately propositional endeavor but rather as a narrative experience that tells not only the stories of the past but encompasses our present story and the story of our future. Theology, therefore, is a mystical experience that tells our story as a part of the greater story of God rather than a static propositional statement. This mystical experience is best done within the confines of the community of believers who share the same journey of drawing closer to understanding more of the God whom we worship and the story we

³³ ‘A Second Reformation is at hand’ Driscoll & Seay.
<http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/culture/reformation.php>

³⁴ See Chapter 1

find ourselves in.³⁵ The modes and means of doing theology within the Emerging Church has shifted from the traditional understanding of maintaining a few good theologians who speak for the whole, to believing that everyone is a theologian capable of contributing to the conversation—or the story at large. Theology is therefore done within the community in a truly collaborative means believing that “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”³⁶

There are, however, strong voices within the Emerging Church that are seemingly elevated above the rest. The voices of Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Rob Bell and others may, at first glance, seem to be dictating the beliefs and direction of the Emerging Church. However, in practice each is just one voice among many or one contributing storyteller to the collective. They may present their ideas in the broader context of a national discussion but not all of their ideas and thoughts are accepted within the Emerging Church. The idea may be rejected but the person is still accepted and encouraged to continue participating in the conversation believing that they do still have other insights to offer. Often times after putting forth an idea through the medium of a book these authors, speakers, and pastors will then travel around to the various Emergent Cohorts throughout the country to discuss their ideas with the throngs of people who are associated with this movement.

In an Emergent Cohort gathering in the northern suburbs of Chicago³⁷, I listened to several people challenge Doug Pagitt on his thoughts concerning String Theory’s

³⁵ Prominent Emergent blogger Adam Walker Cleaveland defines theology as ‘any action in which we [the community] put ourselves in a place to both speak about God and receive from God; it consists of both our thoughts and statements about God while at the same time, our experience of the God who is beyond all thoughts and statements.’ <http://pomomusings.com/2007/05/31/re-what-is-theology/>

³⁶ Proverbs 27.17

³⁷ Uprooted, September 28, 2006.

impact upon our theological understandings. The cohort spent a great amount of time discussing this very topic, putting forth their objections and discussing Pagitt's thoughts to great lengths. There was hardly a full-fledged acceptance of everything he said, yet this is the point of the Emerging Conversation: everyone must be empowered to think for himself or herself and contribute to the conversation for you never know whom God may choose to speak through in order to direct the conversation towards his ultimate means. Because we live in a day where the Scriptures are readily accessible and the Holy Spirit works through everyone there is no reason not to study and explore God through conversation in the larger community. Peter Rollins states it this way: "That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking."

Due to the context in which the Emerging Church practices her theology (in community), the question for their theological imperative has shifted from trying to discover "What do we believe?" to a more rooted theological perspective, discovering "Why do we believe what we believe?". As a result they challenge many of the presuppositions of traditional orthodox evangelicalism as they seek out the "why". Many see this subtle shift as a subversive attack on the establishment of doctrine and theological identity³⁸ but the Emerging Church is making an attempt at understanding the root of belief instead of blind acceptance.

The postmodern mindset has given permission in the Emerging Church to question and doubt established orthodox norms of traditional theology not to come up with new beliefs but rather to explore why it is we believe what we believe. It is a process that seeks to fine-tune our theological dispositions instead of accepting traditional

³⁸ John MacArthur. *The Truth War.*; D.A. Carson. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* are two of the more prominent writers that criticize this approach by the Emerging Church.

understandings that may or may not have the ground to stand upon. However, in order to fine-tune we must first begin to deconstruct our traditional understandings to pair down the doctrine we are attempting to understand to its utmost core before building upon it. By going through the process of deconstruction and the redemptive process of reconstruction we are able to fine-tune doctrinal understanding for our culture today that speaks to us today and allows for us to interact with and utilize doctrine in our daily lives as we seek to understand and draw closer to God.

Dr. Neal Windham can often be heard saying, “Study abroad but always come back home.” I believe that the wisdom of this saying can quite easily be translated into the pseudo-mantra of the Emerging Church. Even though they study abroad by looking at different philosophies and religions, authors and poets, sciences and political spheres they constantly find their way back home bringing in the new insights of truth that they have been exposed to in order to help bring theology to life in the present culture, enhancing the story in which we find ourselves. It is the Emerging Church that states, “Everything is theological,”³⁹ yet in the realm of our felt need for hard and fast theological positions, this statement lands on questioning and skeptical ears.

Tony Jones, the National Coordinator for Emergent Village, reminisces about an encounter at a workshop he was leading at the National Youth Workers Convention when a woman questioned him saying:

“In the seminar this morning, you didn’t say that you’re a relativist and a universalist, but that’s what I heard.”

When I declared that I would not defend my own non-declarations, a guy chimed in with, “Yeah, that’s what I heard you saying too, even though you didn’t really say it.”

Then I got a little more ornery, and I asked why in the world people would impute statements to me that they admit I have not said.

³⁹ Rob Bell at the Poets, Prophets, Preachers Conference.

About then another guy spoke up: “OK, then why don’t you just put the argument to rest and make a definitive statement about what Emergent believes about absolute truth.”

I replied, “Emergent doesn’t have a position on absolute truth, or on anything for that matter.”⁴⁰

Even though the route through which the Emerging Church takes to develop its theological perspectives and positions is a rather arduous task leaving an ill-defined national credo, and despite the criticism and misunderstanding ascribed to the process, the individuals that make up the collective are not far off from the essential doctrines of traditional orthodox evangelicalism. One needs to look no further than three theological works given by the Emerging Church for a comprehensive approach to its theological bent, (although because ‘everything is theological’ there are theological perspectives and statements throughout the Emerging Church’s body of work and each of these perspectives continue to line up with traditional orthodox evangelicalism). These three important works provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Emerging Church’s stance on the essential doctrines of the faith: *How (Not) To Speak of God* by Peter Rollins; *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* edited by Robert Webber; and *Theology for the Community of God* by Stanley J. Grenz.

Peter Rollins begins his theological approach, which has been adopted by the Emerging Church, by suggesting that the reader shift away from the notion of ‘God as an object’ and instead move into the realm of ‘God as subject.’ This is an integral and foundational piece as we continue to understand the Emerging Church’s positions of faith. Rollins says:

“...lust treats the other solely as an object to be devoured; love treats the other as a subject who cannot be reduced wholly to an object. God can never be and ought

⁴⁰ <http://www.theoblogy.blogspot.com/2005/11/national-youth-workers-convention.html>

never to be reduced to a mere object for consideration, for faith in God is experienced as the ultimate subject. God is not a theoretical problem to somehow resolve but rather a mystery to be participated in.”⁴¹

Rollins continues by declaring such an approach is the difference between having an engaging, intimate encounter with a real God as opposed to just describing some objective fact. It is the difference between an incarnational reality and a deistic god that is just out there somewhere; it is the difference between an experiential faith and one that is merely subjective and objectified. It is here that Rollins pauses to make this profound statement: “Religious truth is thus that which *transforms* reality rather than that which describes it.”⁴² The Emerging Church seeks to use theology as a transformative agent within the world believing that the fullness of God’s revealed truth, through both special and natural revelation, has the power through Jesus to change the world. Two of the four driving values that Emergent Village holds in high esteem are a ‘Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus’ and a ‘Commitment to God’s World’. These two values read as follows:

- 1) *Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus:* We are committed to doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, as the Scriptures teach. In the words of Jesus, we seek to live by the Great Commandment: loving God and loving our neighbors—including those who might be considered “the least of these” or enemies. We understand the gospel to be centered in Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God, a message of reconciliation with God and among humanity.
- 2) *Commitment to God’s World:* We practice our faith missionally⁴³--that is, we do not isolate ourselves from this world, but rather, we follow Christ into the world. We seek to fulfill the mission of God in our generations, and then to pass the baton faithfully to the next generations as well. We believe the church exists for the benefit and blessing of the world at large; we seek

⁴¹ Rollins, Peter. *How (Not) To Speak of God*. pg. 22

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 23. (emphasis mine)

⁴³ Dan Kimball insists that this is the measure of success for the emerging church (practicing our faith missionally), as opposed to the modern church’s measure of success as found in the three B’s—buildings, budgets, and bodies (*The Emerging Church*. P. 15).

therefore not to be blessed to the exclusion of everyone else, but rather for the benefit of everyone else. We see the earth and all it contains as God's beloved creation, and so we join God in seeking its good, its healing, and its blessing.⁴⁴

This is the transformative power that the theology can hold when exercised faithfully as a transformative agent instead of as a descriptor.

The Emerging Church believes that somewhere along the way the Modern Church lost sight of the "subject" that is our God and objectified Him instead of allowing Him to be whom He will be (Exodus 3.14⁴⁵). We have instead fallen in line with our ego-centric culture placing ourselves as the subject rather than the object.

"God is not the *object* of our thought but rather the *absolute subject* before whom *we are the object*. This is confirmed in baptism when we say that we are 'baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost'. Here we do not name God but God's name names us. [We are called his children.]"⁴⁶

Our transformation begins at salvation, confirmed through our baptism and carried throughout our sanctification until we are ultimately glorified and it is throughout this entire experience that we grow in our understanding of theology and draw closer to the subject that is God, partnering with him to transform the world. It is ultimately our understanding of God through Jesus that will determine how we interact with the world all ultimately reflect through the rest of our theological positions.

The Emerging Church holds Jesus not only as God's Son, but also as God himself, a part of the Trinity as stated in the Nicene Creed⁴⁷. Mark Driscoll writes not only of the necessity of a high Trinitarian position, but of Jesus as well, "if we lose the

⁴⁴ Each value and its description have been taken verbatim from "Emergent Village."
<http://www.emergentvillage.com/Site/Belong/Order/index.htm>

⁴⁵ Proper translation of Exodus 3.14 would render this passage to say, "I will be whom I will be" rather than 'I AM.'

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 23.

⁴⁷ Nicene Creed: "We believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;"]

Trinity we also lose Jesus,”⁴⁸ to which the other writers in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, respond in agreement. The Emerging Church believes in the same Jesus as Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism believing that he came to earth, was crucified and rose again on the third day. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is no disputing this fact.⁴⁹

Surprising to many, the Emerging Church also holds a very high view of Scripture. The charges levied against the Emerging Church, and more specifically Brian McLaren for denying Scripture have been nothing more than gross misrepresentations of what has actually been stated as they continue to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion rather than of grace. Those who make such hard and fast claims, question how McLaren and the rest of the Emerging Church could even be considered “biblical” Christians,⁵⁰ and based upon their statements, Christians at all.

Dennis McCallum, author of *The Death of Truth*, writes: “In view of the latent relativism in Emergent theology, we should not feel surprised to see their top leaders accepting universalism and denying the substitutionary death of Jesus.”⁵¹ McCallum bases this indictment on a sound bite from an interview given by Brian McLaren. McCallum notes: “When asked about exclusivism, inclusivism, conditionalism and universalism McLaren says in a recent post, ‘I think that people can be good Christians with any of these views.’”⁵² Unfortunately, McCallum has taken this statement out of

⁴⁸ Ed. Robert Webber. *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 28.

⁴⁹ Why only one paragraph concerning Jesus and the Trinity? The similarities between the Emerging Church and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism are identical and a run-down of the list would prove to be a redundant, pedantic exercise of futility.

⁵⁰ Carson, D.A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, p. 187.

⁵¹ <http://www.xenos.org/essays/newbiggin-emergent.htm>

⁵² <http://www.xenos.org/essays/newbiggin-emergent.htm#sdendnote21sym>

context, failing to grasp McLaren's point and thus construing a baseless indictment against him and the Emerging Church. McLaren's originally stated response to the question of exclusivism, inclusivism, conditionalism and universalism in context reads:

I think that people can be good Christians with any of these views, and I also think that they can be bad Christians. One of my biggest concerns, though, is that a hell-focused understanding of the gospel distracts us from the real message of Jesus – which is the Kingdom of God. I think what would help us most would be a kingdom-focused understanding of the gospel.⁵³

Earlier, in the same interview, McLaren has this to say in regards to the issue of hell and subsequently lays out his view of Scripture:

All of us who have a high view of Scripture don't want to blunt its sharp edges; we want to be faithful to Scripture, and to God --- even when it's hard to do so. Yet --- as I try to show in the book [*The Last Word and the Word After That*] --- the Bible's treatment of hell and judgment is significantly more nuanced, multifaceted, and rich than the conventional teaching we often hear. Grappling with the Bible's complex of teachings on hell and judgment seems to run up against the picture of God we get in the Bible: how do we reconcile the two? That's not easy. It calls into question our hermeneutic (way of interpreting) as well. What do we do with a subject that is never mentioned in the Old Testament, that arises in the Inter-Testamental period and is not universally accepted (except by Jesus' main antagonists), and then is handled by Jesus in fascinating, sophisticated ways? Add to that the varied ways the apostles deal with the subject (or don't deal with it) and you have a pretty challenging situation.⁵⁴

Because of the complexity of interpreting Scripture's position on hell McLaren is unable and unwilling to put a "stamp of approval" on any particular interpretation of hell, (yet at the same time goes on record to say that, "hell is not a myth."⁵⁵) For this uncertainty, he (and the Emerging Church by association⁵⁶) is being labeled as both relativist and universalist. Since when did the position of, 'I don't know,' become a heretical position?

⁵³ [http://www.the-next-wave.org/storeis/storyReader\\$700](http://www.the-next-wave.org/storeis/storyReader$700)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ "As far as I can tell, Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke are the most influential leaders of the emerging movement in their respective countries. I would feel much less worried about the directions being taken by

Donald Carson picks up on this same theme in his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Carson accuses McLaren of sliding away from Scripture on the issue of hell while never denying what Scripture says about the subject all the while ducking the question of hell. To this Carson questions how McLaren can even be called a “biblical” Christian.⁵⁷

Both McCallum and Carson seem to be advocating the position that in order to be a “biblical” Christian one needs to hold hard and fast to the correct position of the doctrine of hell⁵⁸ because believing in hell just is not enough it seems. Unfortunately the byproduct of such a position is that believing the right thing about hell is necessary for salvation at most and being a “biblical” Christian, at the very least. This creates larger problems in the fact that different denominations hold different doctrinal stances on hell, further narrowing the “eligible” for salvation to only those that believe in the correct doctrine. Interestingly enough, C. S. Lewis, considered one of the greatest thinkers of his time and of all time, advocated the position of annihilation in his book *The Great Divorce*, and a position of inclusivism in his book *The Last Battle*, yet never have I heard Lewis deemed a heretic, a relativist or unbiblical in any way.

Carson continues his criticism of McLaren and the Emerging Church in the area of the atonement. Carson quotes McLaren: “That [the atonement] just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?”⁵⁹ Carson critiques this by saying:

other emerging church leaders if these leaders would rise up and call McLaren and Chalke to account where they have clearly abandoned what the Bible actually says,” (Carson, D.A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, p. 187).

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 168-169.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, they themselves never articulate clearly in their writings against the Emerging Church.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 166.

These objections are placed on the lips of Kerry, who is the non-believer finding out about faith. But the objections are never answered and are elsewhere voiced by McLaren himself, who makes no attempt either to show how those who support substitutionary atonement would answer such objections or to examine the extent to which substitutionary atonement is taught in Scripture.⁶⁰

This is not the most responsible way of dealing with McLaren's text, which is a fictional story created to stir up discussion rather than taken at face value as a theological treatise.

In the preface of *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, McLaren outlines a disclaimer for the story to follow suggesting this same fact.

Neo and friends raise and ponder what may seem to you dangerous questions and dangerous answers in the pages that follow. *Please do not assume that their answers are always mine*; you may, however, safely assume that I think that all their questions and answers deserve consideration. If you are dissatisfied with some of the answers you find here (as am I), there's a good chance you're right. So I hope that you'll use your dissatisfaction constructively and attempt to articulate better answers yourself. I'll continue to try to do the same thing. Let's be respectful colleagues, not critical adversaries.⁶¹

Carson articulates good points in his critique of the theologies presented in this narrative; however it should not be assumed that McLaren and the Emerging Church disagree with his critique.

A third area in which Carson criticizes McLaren and the Emerging Church for their erosion of biblical Christianity is over the issue of homosexuality. Carson cites a Question and Answer session at the 2004 Emergent Convention in which McLaren, when asked directly about homosexuality, responded with uncertainty as to what biblically defined homosexuality really was and therefore did not want to answer the question directly. Secondly, he wanted to stress the importance of treating homosexuals as people. Carson uses McLaren's uncertainty as a point of contention to condemn him for

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ McLaren, Brian D. *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, p. xii-xiii

promoting the erosion of biblical Christianity.⁶² Yet later Carson states: “... it is highly regrettable that Christians are drawing lines on this issue as opposed to more central issues.”⁶³ Unfortunately, Carson’s position is really no different than what he criticizes.

Carson’s trust in the credibility of McLaren is completely absent, thus his approach of a hermeneutic of suspicion towards all of McLaren’s writings regardless of its genre, the author’s intent, and the disclaimers made. As Carson presents a weak case against the Emerging Church, he suggests that it is nothing more than a form of seeker-sensitivity taken to the extreme, a hyper seeker-sensitive movement. Unfortunately this is an incorrect assertion and another misunderstanding of the missional values, philosophies, and Scriptural understandings that drive the Emerging Church.⁶⁴

In response to the criticism levied against McLaren and the Emerging Church regarding their treatment of Scripture, McLaren sent forth an article to articulate his exact position.

Perhaps the best way to use Scripture is to not concentrate on our use of Scripture at all, but rather to focus on our pursuit of mission. Then we will need Scripture to do what it was intended to do. The Bible, Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, is good for equipping people to do good works. It does so, specifically, through teaching (telling you what is true and right), rebuking (helping you see where you’ve gone wrong), correction (guiding you on how to get on the right track again), and training in justice (educating you in the skills of staying on the right path.)

Interestingly, when Scripture itself talks about itself, it doesn’t use the language we often use in our explanations of its value. For modern western Christians, words like *authority*, *inerrancy*, *infallibility*, *revelation*, *objective*, *absolute* and *literal* are crucial. Many churches or denominations won’t allow people to become members unless they use these words in their description of Scripture. Hardly anyone realizes why these words are important. Hardly anyone knows about the stories of Sir Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, the Enlightenment, David Hume and Foundationalism—which provide the context in which these

⁶² Carson, D.A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, p. 170.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 172

⁶⁴ A better description might be post-seeker-sensitive as suggested by Dan Kimball in his book *The Emerging Church*, p. 105.

words are so important. Hardly anyone notices the irony of resorting to the authority of extra-biblical words and concepts to justify one’s belief in the Bible’s ultimate authority.

Oddly, I’ve never heard of a church or denomination that asked people to affirm a doctrinal statement like this: The purpose of Scripture is to equip God’s people for good works. Shouldn’t a simple statement like this be far more important than statements with words foreign to the Bible’s vocabulary about itself (*inerrant, authoritative, literal, revelatory, objective, absolute, etc.*)?⁶⁵

Many have been frustrated by the suggestion that we take the words inerrant, authoritative, literal, etc. out of the picture and allow Scripture alone to define itself. Yet they have called McLaren and proponents of the Emerging Church heretics for such a proposal, often labeling it a death of truth and authority.⁶⁶ Even though these words may have been good and effective descriptors for Scripture in the past, we should not view these extra-biblical words to be essential in its definition. In fact, McLaren’s position falls more in line with a literal reading of the Restoration Movements credo: “Where the Scriptures speak we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”

The Emerging Church’s penchant for doing theology in a communal context with the under girding of a postmodern epistemological practice has done little to skew the integrity of their theological positions. If anything it has and continues to be faithful to Scripture, General Revelation, Special Revelation and the Truth that God has revealed to us throughout the world. Heretics, they are not; and, an erosion of Truth and Biblical authority is not taking place in their midst. Proponents of the Emerging Church are successfully attempting to bring theology back to the people in an accessible way that speaks to the culture spurring transformation in the world around them. Their “way” of doing theology has affected their view of the gospel, which has ultimately led to the way

⁶⁵ Brian D. McLaren. *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am A Biblical Christian*. January, 2005. <http://www.forministry.com/vsItemDisplay.dps&objectID=04995D94-0D39-40AE-B6CCCA1171C1900E&method=display&templateID=C3435351-D45C-4B52-867A3F794D1CD85C>

⁶⁶ <http://sliceoflaodicea.com>

in which they live out their faith. In the next two moves we will explore how their “doing” of theology has affected their view of the gospel which in turn drives their missional values.

CHAPTER 3: A NEW GOSPEL?

Many preachers, teachers, webloggers, and authors are raging from their respective forums that the Emerging Church is proclaiming a new kind of gospel, a gospel that either rejects Jesus as the Christ or simply supplants the atoning work of grace performed on the cross with a new form of Christian apostasy that looks to experience, iconography, liturgy and the sacraments as their saving grace. The critics have levied charges that as a result of the Emerging Church straying away from the authority of Scripture,⁶⁷ they have begun to move away from anything that remotely resembles the gospel and instead have embraced other religions and practices that are far from Scripture.⁶⁸ As a result of these charges, the Calvary Chapel movement has decided to disfellowship any church that is moving towards the Emerging Church movement⁶⁹ and in the near future many other denominations will more than likely follow suit.⁷⁰ So, is it true? Is the Emerging Church founding a new gospel that strays away from the Scriptures only to replace it with a sort of neo-soteriology?

Roger Oakland, the founder of a watchdog ministry known as ‘Understand the Times International’ and former staff member at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa,

⁶⁷ See Chapter 2

⁶⁸ <http://www3.calvarychapel.com/ccof2/parsonstoparson.pdf>

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Perhaps the most vocal critics against the Emerging Church have been that of the Acts 29 Network, Desiring God Ministries and the Southern Baptist Convention for whom they would classify the Emerging Church as apostates.

California, certainly believes so. He has written a series of articles and has spoken at a variety of churches outlining what he believes the Emerging Church presents as the gospel. Oakland states:

“[Dan Kimball] truly believes that what he is doing is reaching this generation. But my point is, reaching them with what? The gospel according to the Scripture or providing some kinds of experiences to draw people into a form of Christianity that isn’t Bible-based?”⁷¹

Oakland goes on to explain that the Emerging Church is nothing more than, “wolves in sheep’s clothing,”⁷² which is intent on distorting and replacing the gospel as found in the Scriptures with more experiential practices based on times from the past. It is Oakland’s assertion that the Emerging Church is attempting to take us back into the Dark Ages, a time when iconography, candles, incense, liturgy, the Roman Catholic Sacraments and experience were the standard and the Scriptures were forbidden to the masses. It is Oakland’s belief that the Emerging Church is, in fact, only attempting to re-introduce Roman Catholicism re-packaged for today’s pluralistic culture. For Oakland, this is the worst form of heresy going so far as to proclaim it “antichrist.”⁷³ He states,

Instead of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves sinners from hell, the gospel has been redefined and totally nullified. The narrow pathway that Jesus proclaimed leads to heaven through faith in Him alone now has been broadened to permit open access for the sake of establishing the “kingdom”.

Worse yet, the command by Jesus that we are to be “His witnesses” has been reinterpreted to mean the very opposite of what Jesus proclaimed. As Karen Ward has stated (from the Church of the Apostles, Seattle, Washington):

‘We do not do evangelism or have a mission. The Holy Spirit is the evangelist, and the mission belongs to God. What we do is simply live our lives publicly as a community in the way of Jesus Christ, and when people inquire why we live this way, we share with them the account of the hope

⁷¹ Oakland, Roger. *The Emerging Church*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idZCcg3MvEI&feature=related>

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Oakland, Roger. *The Inclusive Gospel*. <http://www.understandthetimes.org/commentary/c66.shtml>

within us. We are to love one another, and that creates its own attraction. Taking care of the sick and the needy – creates all the evangelism we need.’

The new evangelization program being promoted by the emerging church, while it may be in the name of Jesus Christ, is antichrist. A formula has been established to provide a bridge that has the potential to unite all religious beliefs in the name of Christ, by circumventing the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷⁴

The gospel that Oakland, Calvary Chapel and the rest of Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism are promulgating is that Jesus came down from heaven and died for our sins so that we could have a right relationship with God and spend eternity with Him in Heaven. The Emerging Church does not disagree with this statement; however they believe that this is not the end of the gospel but rather only the beginning. They believe that the gospel is much larger, much richer, more multi-faceted and more nuanced than the simple statement above. In fact, the gospel is a life-long pursuit of Jesus in which our story interweaves with the purposes of God to bring about restoration and reconciliation in our relationships with God, creation, the rest of mankind, and our own inner-self.

There is a fundamental shift that has taken place between the Emerging Church and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism concerning the scope of the gospel. Whereas Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism sees the story of salvation beginning in Genesis chapter 3 with our fall and total depravity,⁷⁵ the Emerging Church believes that the story actually begins in Genesis chapter 1. It is understood by the Emerging Church that the creation account was God’s original intention for the world and that he wants to bring us

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ One needs only to look at a variety of Gospel Tracts explaining the salvation story to see that it begins with our fall from God in Genesis 3.

back to the way that things were always supposed to be like, here and now.⁷⁶ Salvation, the gospel, is more than just a reconciled relationship to God, but it also deals with the other relationships that were destroyed as a result of the Fall in Genesis 3—our relationship to Creation,⁷⁷ other people,⁷⁸ and our inner-self.⁷⁹ The belief is that these reconciled relationships will not happen upon Christ’s return but rather in the here and now, for salvation has already come in the person of Jesus Christ and we can experience the entire scope of the gospel in the present. It is because of this belief that the Emerging Church lives their faith the way that they do, seeking after what Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism claims is a gospel that has been redefined, broadened and totally nullified.⁸⁰

A. W. Tozer expressed several years ago his “feeling that a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles—the widely accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want to.”⁸¹ I am in no way insinuating that Roger Oakland or that by association the rest of Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism are heretics, however it is ironic to note that Oakland calls the obedience of Karen Ward and the rest of Church of the Apostles’ to an evangelization program of “taking care of the sick and needy,” which comes straight from Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, and their “love for one another,” a direct representation of the Greatest

⁷⁶ I first heard this idea promoted by Rob Bell in a sermon series entitled “Mastering the Art of Living” in the fall of 2006. It has since been spoken of by Rob Bell in his NOOMA video *Trees* and by other prominent Emerging Church proponents.

⁷⁷ Genesis 3:17-19

⁷⁸ Genesis 3:12, 16

⁷⁹ Genesis 3:7

⁸⁰ Oakland, Roger. *The Inclusive Gospel*. <http://www.understandthetimes.org/commentary/c66.shtml>

⁸¹ Tozer, A. W. *I Call It Heresy*. (Harrisburg, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1974), p. 5f.

Commandment in Matthew 22, as nothing more than “antichrist.”⁸² In one fell swoop Oakland disregards two key passages of Scripture from the gospels. By doing so, he does the very thing he accuses the Emerging Church of doing—“drawing people into a form of Christianity that isn’t Bible-based.”⁸³ I do not believe that this is Oakland’s intention; however his words give pause for concern and show the disparity in the scope of the gospel between the Emerging Church and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism.

The gospel is richer, more multi-faceted, layered and nuanced than we realize or give it credit. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones surmises that the gospel is in fact more broad than simply bringing about a reconciled relationship with mankind and God. He estimates that throughout the Epistles, the Apostle Paul gives us over 50 different threads of the gospel that are to be experienced and practiced to bring about reconciliation throughout the world.⁸⁴

As the Church, it is our responsibility that we are not settling for nor presenting a truncated version of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Ron Martoia suggests in his book *Static: Tune out the “Christian noise” and experience the real message of Jesus*, that “We have reduced the gospel and abbreviated the story. We have decided that ‘the gospel’ is all about getting people a seat in the heavenly stadium”⁸⁵ and as a result we have missed the rest of the story. The Emerging Church is attempting to bring about the fullness of the entire story of Scripture, the gospel, and how we fit into God’s grand story of restoration. Martoia continues:

⁸² Oakland, Roger. *The Inclusive Gospel*. <http://www.understandthetimes.org/commentary/c66.shtml>

⁸³ Oakland, Roger. *The Emerging Church*.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idZCcg3MvEI&feature=related>

⁸⁴ As told by Dr. Timothy J Keller. *Preaching the Gospel*. July 12, 2006. Reform & Resurge Conference, Seattle, WA.

⁸⁵ Martoia, Ron. *Static* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2007), 26.

“We are trying to figure out how to communicate clearly and in nonhostile (sic) ways the most important story in human history. Even more, we are trying to make sure we tell the real story—and the full story—not a CliffsNotes version that leaves out important, plot-altering details, or a *Reader’s Digest* excerpt. We are trying to invite people into the greatest story ever told, a story that can help them make sense of their personal stories, and their life’s trajectory, and find a destiny and connection in loving God and loving others.⁸⁶

Perhaps the greatest difference between Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church in relation to their rendering of the gospel has more to do with their differing eschatological viewpoints. Whereas Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism focuses on changing an individual’s eternal destination (heaven vs. hell) as the sole priority, the Emerging Church tends to focus, as their sole priority, on the present and how the church can change the lives of people now so that they can experience a relationship with God in the present. Often times this is understood in economical terms—how can we bring people out of poverty or oppression, how can we take people off of the streets, and how can the church play a major role in this because this is what the Kingdom is really all about, establishing a restored world that harkens back to Genesis 1 bringing things about to the way that they were always supposed to be like. Brian McLaren articulates this point in his book *Everything Must Change*.

Jesus’ message is not actually about escaping this troubled world for heaven’s blissful shores, as is popularly assumed, but instead is about God’s will being done on this troubled earth as it is in heaven [this is a direct reference to the Lord’s Prayer].⁸⁷

They’ve [those in conversation with the Emerging Church] already been thinking and feeling, including a suspicion that the religious status quo is broken and a desire to translate their faith into a way of life that makes a positive difference in the world. They share my belief that the versions of Christianity we inherited are largely flattened, watered down, tamed . . . offering us a ticket to heaven after death, but not challenging us to address the issues that threaten life on earth. Together we’ve begun to seek a fresh understanding of what Christianity is for,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 32

⁸⁷ McLaren, Brian D. *Everything Must Change*, p. 4

what a church can be and do, and most exciting, we're finding out that a lot of what we need most is already hidden in a trunk in our attic. Which is good news.⁸⁸

McLaren believes that what has happened in the church is that we have so narrowed our focus and the gospel to be only about the afterlife that we've forgotten about life itself. A typical spoken phrase from Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism is that life is simply a dress rehearsal for heaven⁸⁹ rendering life nothing more than a practice run at what will really count in eternity. This could not be further from the truth and the Emerging Church is taking up the banner of the present so that those who are suffering in the here and now can experience some form of justice, mercy and love through God's outstretched hand of the church because all of life is precious not just the after-life.

To some, this reeks of the Social Gospel of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who have charged that this is simply a re-packaged form in hip new clothing.⁹⁰ The charge of the past is that the Social Gospel in its attempts to change the present completely lost sight of Jesus.⁹¹ Even though this is a valid critique of the Social Gospel of the past, it is not a fair assumption and is a disingenuous charge to levy that the Emerging Church is quickly attempting to remove Jesus from the center of everything that is being done. In fact, the Emerging Church strives never to lose sight of Jesus. It is for and because of Jesus' words in Matthew 25⁹² that the Emerging Church has such a

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3

⁸⁹ Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁹⁰ http://www.apprising.org/archives/2006/02/emergent_church_20.html

⁹¹ <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume30/GOT030007.htm>

⁹² The call to taking care of "the least of these" has been reinvigorated by the work of Jim Wallace (author of *God's Politics*) and Sojourn Magazine (<http://sojo.net>)

deep and profound conviction for bringing about justice, mercy and grace into a world that is void of such virtue.⁹³

As a result of their focus on the present ills of the world, and the claims of a new Social Gospel by the critics, one could begin to question whether or not this is really a works based faith. The typical pattern of the Church has been to sway to one side or the other by heavily focusing on either grace as the means to salvation, or works as the means to salvation. Perhaps one of the most difficult things to find in this grace versus works debate is a sense of balance. The Emerging Church would quickly move to cite James 2:14-19 and say that this is not an either/or sort of debate but rather both/and. In the past the Church has focused so heavily on grace that they have forgotten about the works of faith that we are to pursue in our own lives (James 1:27) for the glory of God and His Kingdom. It could be inferred that hostilities towards the Emerging Church and the belief that the gospel can make a difference in the present, that the Church is in the midst of a full pendulum swing toward grace while leaving the *living out of that faith by grace* in the dust. Could the Emerging Church simply be the ballast that God is using to bring the Church and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism back towards a better Scriptural alignment?

It is crucial that we begin seeing the gospel in broader terms and move away from the gospel only as an escape-hatch from our present societal woes. We need to begin seeing the gospel as something that can truly bring Good News to everyone; that Jesus' death and resurrection did so much more than the amazing act of restoring us back to God. But within his amazing act of grace we are also able to have right relationships

⁹³ Also see Karen Ward quote on page 2 of this chapter to gain another glimpse to what the Emerging Church is doing to present the gospel to the world around them.

with each other, with our inner-self, and with creation. That is Good News. That is the Good News that is spoken of in Scripture, and that is the Good News that can bring hope to the broken-hearted that families can be restored; that can bring hope to the depressed and downtrodden that Jesus brings restoration to heart and mind; and, that can bring hope to the environmentalist that God's creation can be turned around and we can play a role in its restoration because of Jesus' amazing act of grace. The gospel is truly Good News for all, about all. The Emerging Church sees Jesus' atoning act as more than atonement for our personal sins, but also encompassing our societal sins that cause the destruction and depravity we currently see in our world. They see Jesus' act as bigger than the individual but something revolutionary that did and continues to change the world for the better as opposed to spiraling downward towards destruction.

A hermeneutic of suspicion is raging in Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism and as a result misunderstandings, horrendous misrepresentations and accusations have flown throughout the church world to regard the Emerging Church as a heretical movement purporting a new gospel that is not the gospel of Jesus. As we have seen, these accusations are unfounded and completely fallacious. As a church, we must begin replacing our hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of grace, giving our brothers and sisters the benefit of the doubt and allowing the fruit of their labor to speak before spewing unfounded accusations about them.

CHAPTER 4: MISSIONAL

Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism seeks to retain a wall between the world and the church in attempts to maintain a holy circle comprised only of those currently within the church and those who will eventually come to the church. This will keep the church free from the impurities of the outside culture believing this to be the best way of exemplifying the glory and holiness of God.⁹⁴ In this *modus operandi* the church, as such, becomes so inwardly focused that the church and Christianity in America are in sharp decline.⁹⁵ Countless examples could be cited from media outlets that depict a separatist agenda from Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism as they seek to keep away from the rest of the world unless it were to change and resemble the wants and/or desires of the church. This mentality has given way to an understanding in relation to God's activity in the world and in the Church.

“The church has often presumed that the reign of God is within the church. The two have been regarded as synonyms.”⁹⁶ However, to do so is to take God and confine his reign, his sovereignty, and his power into the dwelling space of the church body; it is to assume and believe that God is in fact not omnipotent but rather only as powerful as the reach of the church. Not only does this challenge his omnipotence, but it also

⁹⁴ Roger Oakland states in regards to the Emerging Church's missional approach to evangelism: “Walls that once separated biblical Christianity from pagan religious belief systems are being demolished.” (<http://www.understandthetimes.org/commentary/c66.shtml>)

⁹⁵ George Barna. *Revolution* (BarnaBooks, 2005).

⁹⁶ Guder, Darrell L. *The Missional Church*, p. 98

challenges his omnipresence for if God's reign is held in trust to the church then can God really be anywhere else? Is it no wonder that in this view there is a 'come-to-us' mentality; for we have reduced God to becoming nothing more than a commodity that we use to bring people to us by completely objectifying Him? God, therefore, becomes the ultimate prop. We must shift our understanding of the church from the keeper of God's glory and sovereignty to the revealers of it. We must turn away from being people that expect the 'glory' of the church to attract people, to being a people that go out into the world and pull back the curtain of pain, suffering and injustice so that God's reign of grace and mercy, love and hope can shine through and be revealed to the world. This is the ultimate role and ministry of the church, to be the revealers of God's light in the darkest corners of the world by revealing what the Kingdom of God is truly like and showing the world the way that it was always intended to be (Genesis 1). This is the heart of incarnational ministry, this is the heart of the missional church, and it is to this end that the Emerging Church passionately strives.

The shift from believing that God's reign dwells within the church to believing that God's reign dwells everywhere is an extension of the postmodern epistemology detailing the notion of the omnipresence of Truth. Because Truth is everywhere, God's presence therefore is everywhere (for God is Truth), and if God's presence is everywhere then it is completely possible to reveal Him to anyone and everyone no matter where they are and what they may be experiencing.

There are many different examples of this incarnational ministry from people like Mother Teresa to Doris Day and contemporaries like Shane Claiborne and the Simple

Way⁹⁷ in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania but regardless of the name or group the common link that runs through them all is a deep, passionate commitment to living in the world in the ways of Jesus in order to peel back the curtain and reveal God's Kingdom to all. It is through the commitment of contemporaries such as these that have led us towards what we now today call the Missional Church.

The Missional Church takes the idea of incarnational ministry and the model of the attractional and traditional church in an attempt to combine them for a middle-of-the-road approach. Proponents of this Missional approach believe in the fruit and results of the Incarnational Ministry model, yet are striving to make sure that the reign of God is in no way divorced from the church. An ecumenical push in the 1950's and 1960's began a sharp separation between the two by proclaiming that it is the "church that goes out into the reign of God."⁹⁸ However, this position "implies that the church is ultimately irrelevant to the mission of God or at least peripheral to it, since the reign of God is entirely located in the world."⁹⁹ This presupposes that the church is a separate entity from the world and from God either leaving it in a delusional state as an island unto itself or hopelessly striving to join in on the reign of God "out there" in the world as its only means of connection with God. Although I do not believe this was the intention and was merely the result of a sharp pendulum swing in the opposite direction of the current climate of an inward focused church, this position does nothing more than begin a sharp tear in understanding the relationship between God and the church.

⁹⁷ <http://thesimpleway.org/>

⁹⁸ World Council of Churches, *The Church for Others*, 1967.

⁹⁹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 100.

Leslie Newbigin picked up on this oncoming disconnect and proposed a middle-of-the-road position that created a balance between the two diverging views formulating the ethos behind what we now know today as The Missional Church. Newbigin stated:

The . . . danger to be avoided is the separation of the Kingdom from the church. It is clear that they cannot and must not be confused, certainly not identified. But they must also not be separated. From the beginning the announcement of the Kingdom led to a summons to follow and so to the formation of a community. It is the community which has begun to taste (even only in foretaste) the reality of the Kingdom which can alone provide the hermeneutic of the message.¹⁰⁰

The church, therefore, is a representation of the reign of God and it is through our actions and our lives that we are to peel back the curtain of darkness to reveal the reign (light, glory) of God not only within the church, but out in the world as well. This assumes the position that the reign of God is nebulous, not simply defined as residing only within the church community or only residing in the world, but rather shared by the two presupposing that both can also contain their share of darkness as well. God's reign, therefore, is located everywhere and the church, no longer the keepers of God's reign, are now the revealers of God's reign. This is the only balance that is a truly biblical expression of what it means to *be* the church.

The church, therefore, must employ a structure of duality in revealing God's reign (also synonymous with God's glory). It (the church) must be inward focused on the ways of Jesus seeking after righteousness and holiness, pulling back the curtain so that the darkness will flee and God's reign will be evident. But it must also employ an outwardly focused mentality to revealing God's reign in the world so that the darkness will flee. Ultimately, this is a Lordship issue. Is Christ Lord of the church? Then reveal His glory. Is Christ Lord of all (the world)? Then reveal His glory. In revealing his glory, there are

¹⁰⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 19.

far more profound implications than just revealing the goodness, the mercy, the loving-kindness and the grace of our Lord and Savior, which are immensely important.

When we reveal the reign of God, we are not simply exposing God's glory to the world but we are revealing the true Trinitarian nature of our God as expressed in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is when we pull back the curtain to the Kingdom and reveal things as they always should have been, (remember Genesis 1), that we expose the Creator God who first revealed himself in the creation of the world as the three-in-one Trinity. It is in this first recorded event that we are witness to the dynamic relationship within the Trinity that is revealed to all upon the creation of the universe as it is called forth (Genesis 1:1-2). Therefore, as co-creators with God in this new-creation (post-resurrection), each and every time that the church peels back the curtain between heaven and earth we are revealing the inherent inter-relational dynamic of God.

The Missional Church is not founded upon the Social Gospel of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but rather is founded in a deeply rooted theological and philosophical understanding of the Trinitarian nature of our God, a high-view of creation, and a strong understanding of its very own biblical purpose and mission. This is the under girding position that holds together and drives the Missional Church forward and of which the Emerging Church has latched onto.

Imago Dei Community, an emerging church¹⁰¹ in Portland, Oregon, has embodied this balance between incarnational and attractional ministry in the form of being a missional church. Their mission statement as a community is, "Taking the whole gospel, to the whole person, to the whole world & equipping people to become mature in

¹⁰¹ <http://www.rickmckinley.net/2007/10/18/my-thoughts-on-the-emerging-church/>

Christ.”¹⁰² They strive through various means to completely embody the gospel in the community by serving alongside existing non-profits to share in a passion for the Kingdom.¹⁰³ They are truly a dual structure church believing that it is through a partnership with those who are far from God that they are able to reveal the Kingdom through their missional focus on the community:

We are the sent people of God, to Portland and beyond. The journey takes on many forms, from acts of compassion where our church may serve, to really befriending broken people and going where they go and living where they live for the sake of loving them and letting Jesus be displayed through us. As representatives of Jesus we strive to engage our culture in issues of social justice, advocacy, assistance, and proclamation as well as simply living the reality of our passion for Christ in the midst of our culture. This is gospel. We look for God-placed flames of passion for the gospel and people. We fan the flame, we resource, we train, we give opportunities, in a word we unleash our community to enter the journey.¹⁰⁴

Imago Dei is just one of a number of churches and organizations that are following this blend of incarnational and attractional models of ministry. Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan is another. Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill along with lead pastor Don Golden have laid out a new set of initiatives focusing this large church community on utilizing their financial resources to make a marked difference in their region and in the poorest country in the world, Burundi. These new initiatives are labeled as the X Y Z’s of Mars Hill and are as follows:

[X:] We believe that every kid in West Michigan should have food and shelter, so we’re partnering with Habitat for Humanity to create new affordable housing opportunities for families.¹⁰⁵

[Y:] The poorest of Grand Rapids who are willing and able should be given a chance to earn a living. Our goal is to increase the income to a level above the poverty level for the economically active, beginning with 50 select families.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² <http://imagodeicommunity.com>

¹⁰³ <http://www.rickmckinley.net/2007/09/10/leading-into-mission/>

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.imagodeicommunity.com/missional-journey/>

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.marshall.org/serving/focus/x/>

[Z:] We believe that the poorest people in the world's poorest economy (Burundi) should be given a chance to help themselves. This is where our partnership with Turame (a micro-finance program started by World Relief). Turame extends business loans to 3,500 individuals in Gitega and Bujumbura provinces. It was judged by the United Nations to be the best microfinance operation in the country. We are working to integrate peace-building initiatives and AIDS education into the program. Our goal is to increase income for the poorest 30% of the economically active in Burundi, the world's poorest economy.¹⁰⁷

Mars Hill Bible Church believes that with the vast resources that God has provided them with along with budding partnerships with non-profit organizations in their community, they will be able to end child homelessness in all of West Michigan, help raise over 50 families in Grand Rapids out of poverty as well as increase the poorest of the poor's income by 30%. They believe that by participating in these transformative actions that not only will the people they are seeking to help but they themselves will be changed by this active participation of restoration and re-creation.¹⁰⁸

These focused missional communities along with many others that are identified with the Emerging Church have begun to influence and transform the non-Emerging Church communities of Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism to begin striving for the same balance between incarnational and attractational. Arguably one of the most prominent communities and leaders¹⁰⁹ of Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism being influenced by the Emerging Church is Rick Warren, lead pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California and author of *The Purpose Driven Church*¹¹⁰ and *The Purpose Driven Life*¹¹¹. Warren has recently unveiled what he is

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.marshill.org/serving/focus/y/>

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.marshill.org/serving/focus/z/>

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.marshill.org/serving/focus/>

¹⁰⁹ http://www.thechurchreport.com/mag_article.php?mid=672&mname=July

¹¹⁰ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

¹¹¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

calling the P.E.A.C.E. Plan¹¹², which seeks to “mobilize 1 billion Christians around the world into an outreach effort to attack the five global, evil giants of our day.”¹¹³ Warren believes that the five global giants of spiritual emptiness, corrupt leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy are affecting billions of people not just in their day-to-day lives but by cutting them off from knowing Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. The only plausible solution for Warren is not through organizations or government involvement but rather through the global Church of Jesus Christ. This is a stark contrast from the movements of the Religious Right and the Moral Majority (the former banner-holders of Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism) who through their actions and practice believed that they could change the world through governmental and political involvement.¹¹⁴

The P.E.A.C.E. Plan is a grass-roots movement created by Rick Warren to effectively equip lay leaders within the church to be fully empowered to implement the P.E.A.C.E. Plan in their very own community. Warren goes about this process by holding several annual conferences at Saddleback Church addressing these major issues. Most recently he faced severe criticism from Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism for his invitation of Senator Barack Obama to speak on the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.¹¹⁵ The outrage over Senator Obama’s invitation is a telling sign that even though Warren is a highly regarded leader within Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism, they are not completely buying into the Missional Movement. This is not to say that the Missional Movement is sitting idly by, rather it is gaining momentum within the Church at large.

¹¹² P.E.A.C.E. stands for P – Promote Reconciliation; E – Equip leaders; A – Assist the poor; C – Care for the sick; E – Educate the next generation. (<http://thepeaceplan.com>)

¹¹³ http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/PEACE/PEACE_Plan.htm

¹¹⁴ http://www.moralmajority.us/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=27

¹¹⁵ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1745134/posts>

Author's Ed Stetzer and David Putman have recently released a joint effort book entitled, *Breaking the Missional Code*,¹¹⁶ which has gained not only a wide readership but a broad acceptance within Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism. Perhaps one of the greatest signs of this broad acceptance is that Ed Stetzer has spoken on the campus of Lincoln Christian College at the 2006 Elders and Church Leaders Conference. Dr. Stetzer has also spoken at the Catalyst conference at North Point Church in Alpharetta, Georgia and has even crossed over to the Emerging Church side and has been a featured speaker at several Acts 29 Events.¹¹⁷ Another recent publication, *The Externally Focused Church*,¹¹⁸ is a look at the impact of what a missionally minded and missionally focused church is capable of doing within their community and has become an influential voice within the Restoration Movement.

There are also other collaborative networks with a missional mind that have begun to spring up throughout the country. The Catalyst organization¹¹⁹ is a cohort of churches in Lake County Illinois that are mobilizing to create a spiritual revolution within their county by unleashing the love of Jesus upon their communities through acts of service. It is this principle of service and love that has led to an emergence of the Missional Movement which could very well be the greatest contribution that the Emerging Church has made to Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism to date.

Even though the Missional Movement has garnered widespread attention and gained some momentum it is not without its skeptics. Many who are critical see the

¹¹⁶ Ed Stetzer & David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2006)

¹¹⁷ The Acts 29 Network is a church planting network birthed out of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington where Mark Driscoll is the lead pastor.

¹¹⁸ Rick Rusaw & Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004)

¹¹⁹ <http://www.catalystweb.org/>

Missional Church as nothing but a trendy new formula for doing church and through their resistance to change they see themselves as being loyal to the Gospel in its pure form. They believe that to go down the missional route is simply to fall into the trap of conforming the message of the gospel to the needs of the audience, which in turn does nothing but water down the message of the gospel. This ultimately shows that by conforming you are simply ashamed of the gospel as it now stands.¹²⁰

This view, although seemingly admirable for its attempt to maintain the purity of the gospel, does exactly the opposite by holding Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism in a box of its own social construction. This causes the church to erect walls of protection from decades past to keep out the influences of the modern-day culture from invading and transforming the gospel into an unrecognizable form. The problem is that by doing so, the walls that are erected inevitably cause the gospel to change into an unrecognizable form by its lack of interaction with the very people it was intended to change—the world.

The Emerging Church does a good job of exegeting the culture in attempts to bring about the Good News and pull back the curtain of God’s glory in the best possible ways, however this “exegesis” is considered apostate in many circles. Roger Oakland maintains that there must always be a wall between Christianity and the world for the sake of purity.¹²¹ However, this tension towards being Missional that is beginning to be stirred within Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism is as a result of the Emerging Church. D. A. Carson in his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* commends the Emerging Church for its ability to recognize the culture and effectively exegete the culture for the best possible impact. Carson states:

¹²⁰ <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/missional-isnt-a-bad-word>

¹²¹ http://www.understandthetimes.org/commentary/c66.shtml#_ftn13

During the last two or three decades many people have written books and articles on the changing culture of America, and most of us are well aware of the rapid developments. But many of us somehow remain under the illusion that we Christians live *outside* these cultural changes. We therefore address the changes from a kind of independent bastion of impregnability. In other words, we observe the changes in the culture and strategize about how to respond faithfully to them, but these changes are all happening *out there*, in the culture – but not in us. In short, many Christians have yet to come to grips with the fact that *we ourselves* are part of this rapidly changing culture, and we cannot help but be influenced by it.

Leaders in the emerging church movement are among the people who rightly recognize this point, and they keep appealing to it. Although their appeal to the social location of all claims to knowledge entails some risks, they nevertheless avoid the trap of thinking that their own understanding or something or other in the Bible is necessarily bound up with eternal truth just because that is what they understand the Bible to be saying.¹²²

Interestingly enough just prior to this commendation, Carson has already accused the leaders of the emerging church movement of being relativistic and pluralistic.¹²³ This is the tension that is brought forth by Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism and the missional value of the Emerging Church. By going out into the community are we somehow compromising our positions and our beliefs in order to fit them into the particular context that we desire to change?

This is not the case, and in fact all we have to do is look to the Bible to see how much of it was contextualized for a particular audiences cultural understanding. Take for instance the Gospels. Matthew was written for a Jewish audience whereas Mark was written for a Roman audience, Luke for a Greek audience and John for a Gentile audience. Although the basic message of salvation and the good news does not change, the look and feel of the good news changes for each audience. Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism is not without its very own contextualization considering that it was

¹²² D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 51-52.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 32.

crafted to reach out to a modern, western cultural mindset. This is the exactly what the Emerging Church Movement is seeking to do with these missional values, contextualize and craft the gospel to reach out to a postmodern, multi-cultural mindset that encompasses people in the melting-pot of North America that come from all walks of life and both Eastern and Western cultures.

CONCLUSION

The perceived heresy that surrounds and characterizes the Emerging Church is really not heretical in the least but rather an ungracious and demonizing look at a movement that is attempting to bring the church in western culture into the 21st century. The shift away from modernism that the Emerging Church is embarking upon in is an attempt to bring the church into the new territory of postmodern epistemology so that the gospel can still be understood effectively in the new global landscape. The church finds itself in the midst of a historic event that has not happened since the project of modernism first began to take shape after the Renaissance with the emergence of the Enlightenment period around 1650. This historic event is the changing of the mindset that guides all of our principles and ideals, and we are in the midst of watching modernism pass away and postmodernism emerge. This shifting time is exactly what the church finds itself engaged in, and attempting to bring the gospel to.

For over 350 years, the church has engaged and been influenced by modern epistemology finding itself married to this very train of thought. The practice of engaging modern epistemology by Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism is exactly the same paradigm within which the Emerging Church focuses and practices; only it is doing so by engaging postmodern epistemological thought. There is no difference between

Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church when you break it down to the lowest common denominator concerning epistemology.

Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism understood that you could not separate your view of the Bible and Truth from the very culture within which you live and move and breathe. This is the exact same mode of operation that the Emerging Church follows, only in the emerging context of postmodernism. Much like missionaries and missiologist's recognize, the gospel must be contextualized to the culture that you are attempting to reach.¹²⁴ There is no such thing as a "pure" cultural form of Christianity, nor is there a one-size-fits-all approach that the gospel can be squeezed into. Even Jesus himself contextualized the gospel for the first century Jewish listeners.

The Emerging Church is simply operating within the context of the postmodern mindset that is becoming more and more pervasive in our western culture. As a result the Emerging Church sees God and Theology in broader terms than what the modern mindset would allow. Even though viewing God and Theology through such broad lenses is considered dangerous by the modern mindset, broad should not be the equivalent of heresy, apostate, or Antichrist, as some have charged. Viewing God and Theology through this lens is simply a different allowance in the postmodern mindset.

Ultimately, this difference in mindset has led respected scholars through their hermeneutic of suspicion towards the Emerging Church to misinterpret and misrepresent this burgeoning movement. This hermeneutic of suspicion is doing nothing more than causing a rift in the church between these two competing mindsets.¹²⁵ We need to retire

¹²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹²⁵ Notice the use of the word 'mindset' as opposed to 'worldview' throughout the course of the conclusion. It is important to note that both the Emerging Church and Traditional Orthodox

this hermeneutic of suspicion for a hermeneutic of grace, or as Bishop N. T. Wright calls it, a hermeneutic of love¹²⁶. Wright says, “we best understand something not merely by critiquing, dissecting, and doubting it, but also by trusting, loving and respecting it. In fact, when critique and questioning come in the context of love, they yield even more insight than otherwise.”¹²⁷ We need to be more gracious to one another within our own worldview and realize that there is more to be gained through a hermeneutic of love and grace than through a hermeneutic of suspicion.

The times are changing and the culture around us is in a state of flux and this could be one of the greatest moments in the life of the church. However, the church needs to rise up and stand together in unity to meet the challenges that lay ahead instead of undercutting each other and the progress that is being made for the Kingdom in the name of Jesus.

It is my firm belief that despite the differences that we may have based upon our mindset, there is a common ground that can bring us together and that is on the playground of missional praxis. Our common thread of evangelism is played out through the Missional Church and can unite us around this common cause.

In order to be united around the common thread of missional praxis we need to overlook our different cultural mindsets in order to work together and push forward. It is in the pushing aside of our cultural mindsets for unity’s sake that we will be able to realize that there are a lot of people holding to the modern-mindset left to reach, and there are a lot of people holding to the postmodern-mindset left to reach. The Emerging

Evangelicalism maintain the same Christian worldview, they simply hold to competing mindsets that are not conducive and is the ultimate source of friction between the two groups.

¹²⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 18.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Church needs to realize that there are moderns left in the world, and Traditional Orthodox Evangelicalism needs to realize that the culture is shifting towards postmodernism and there are countless individuals who hold this value. By setting aside our differences and playing to our strengths the church will be able to reach out to those who need to hear the gospel. If we could set aside these differences we would see a move of God through our united front that would boggle the mind.

We are at an unprecedented point in history marked in the midst of something that has happened only a handful of times. The church needs to be at the forefront of this move and the Emerging Church currently is leading the way to reaching out to this new emerging postmodern culture. This is why we need to embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ instead of as enemies of the gospel.

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