

The Emerging Church: From Mission to 'Missional'

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With particularly Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's influence and missiologist David J. Bosch's observations (and arguably recommendations) concerning mission in a contemporary postmodern culture, the phenomenon now known as the emerging church began to coagulate in the West in the 1990s. This movement has been recorded as having its genesis in a reflexive response to the onset of postmodernism regarding how to effectively engage with a postmodern culture.¹ The contextualisation of the gospel, along with the perceived myth of secularisation, the move towards incarnational ministry, the redemption of creation and a refocusing of the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus in the Gospels² have all helped to form a basic missionary focus for the emerging church.³ The most well-used mission terminology of the emerging church is the word '*missional*'.⁴ And so from the early years of the Church and its sense of mission (as it has been described for most of the Church's existence), this novel parlance of a missional Church has come into being. The Church is seen, at least by those within the emerging church, to have gone from a need for *mission* to a need to become missional. The observation that the emerging church leans on culture for its practice does not do the emerging church a disservice in itself. We see that throughout the Church age, the various transformations of the Church have revealed that leaning on culture for expression (and also for mission and evangelism) has not necessarily proven to be a damaging pursuit. The question worth asking though is; to what *extent* is the emerging church leaning on culture for its practice?

There are of course questions which develop from this overview: Is the emerging church approach a biblical one? Does 'missional' work in practice? What does the

¹ J. D. Payne, *Kingdom Expressions: Trends Influencing the Advancement of the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), p. 45.

² Principles espoused by Newbigin in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

³ In Bob Hopkins, 'Making Sense of the Emerging Church' in <www.acpi.org.uk> (_____) <http://www.acpi.org.uk/Joomla/index.php?option=com_context&task=view&id=35&itemid=65> [accessed 05 February 2013], Hopkins suggests that the terms 'emerging church', 'missional church' and 'fresh expressions', etc. are interchangeable. As such I will also use the term 'emerging church' to cover these various terms.

⁴ See Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2006) for not only a scholarly view of the *missio Dei*, but also for a helpful and formative definition of 'missional'.

theory of 'missional' engagement actually *look* like in practice? What are the criticisms of the missional approach and why are there criticisms? For now, it is viable to argue that there is a definite link between the emerging church view on the role of culture and on its missional practice. It is towards a greater understanding of the cultural context of postmodernism and its impact on emerging church theo-praxis that this article will investigate. In doing so, the clear evangelical stance reveals that there is still a large section of the Christian Church which rejects an embracing of postmodernism, to which we now turn...

Rejecting the Idea of a Postmodern Christianity

Don A. Carson recoils at the thought of postmodernism's insistence that objective knowledge is neither attainable nor desirable.⁵ Revealing his own allegiance to the evangelical discipline of biblical theology, Carson labels the postmodern discussion as a manipulative antithesis⁶ and that the Christian Church cannot align itself with a philosophy which removes all distinctions between right and wrong.⁷ It is not only the sense that objective truth is being challenged⁸, but that in tandem with the challenge on objective truth comes the "deep sense that morality is relative."⁹ In a more apocalyptic vein, R. Albert Mohler Jr. argues that the very integrity of evangelical Christianity is at stake if there is an embracing of postmodernism and its philosophy. Mohler feels that this is already taking place within evangelical Christianity, to the detriment of his understanding of what a biblical stance (albeit through an evangelical filter) truly is.¹⁰

One of the evangelical responses to postmodern influences within the contemporary Church has been to preach even more robustly on evangelical truth, in order to stem the tide of what is perceived by many evangelicals as biblical compromise. Bryan Chappell takes up the viewpoint that, "This generation of preachers will face no

⁵ Don A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁸ David Dockery, 'The Challenge of Postmodernism' in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. by David Dockery (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 9-18 (p. 11).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ R. Albert Mohler, 'The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm' in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. by David Dockery (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 53-74 (p. 70).

greater challenge than confronting a cultural acceptance of religious pluralism with an uncompromising commitment to the uniqueness of Christian faith as God's way of salvation from the human predicament."¹¹ Although there may be an acceptance that cultures shift, and that within the art of preaching, ideas should be adjusted to people so that people can be adjusted to ideas¹², Jeffrey D. Arthurs still maintains that the biblical preacher must adhere to the concept of truth. There remains a strong drive for preachers within the evangelical movement to be reliant on the "powerful, authoritative word in the midst of a culture that is looking for a voice in the wilderness."¹³

As a philosophy, the basic proposals within postmodernism are being rejected based primarily on the sense of fluid morality, suggestions of relativity, and religious pluralism. One of the arguments against a Christian embracing postmodernism is that there is a feeling among some within the Church that society will decline under the grip of a postmodern paradigm. Ernest Hulse contends that due to the moral relativity within postmodernism, a consequent disastrous breakdown in family values, family life and in marriage itself is inevitable.¹⁴ This perception also views evangelical Christianity as being under threat of being either dismissed or marginalised, should postmodernism gain a significant and widespread hold on the West.¹⁵ This is due to the postmodern claim of removing author intent, which can be seen as undermining a biblical theology hermeneutic, thus undermining those who espouse to such a hermeneutic. The postmodern reliance on image, technology and media is also challenged by Hulse, claiming that the increasing "welter of images"¹⁶ which lack moral and intellectual cohesion helps to fragment the contemporary mind. An increasing allegiance to information via media therefore allows for the perception of a cosmos which has neither discipline nor unity.¹⁷

¹¹ Bryan Chappell, 'The Necessity of Preaching Christ in a World Hostile to Him' in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, ed. by Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), pp. 59-78 (p. 61).

¹² Jeffrey D. Arthurs, 'The Postmodern Mind and Preaching' in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, ed. by Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), pp. 177-198 (p. 179).

¹³ Scott M. Gibson, 'Biblical Preaching in an Anti-authority Age' in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, ed. by Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), pp. 215-227 (p. 226).

¹⁴ Ernest Hulse, 'What is Postmodernism?' in *Reformation Today* (____), pp. 1-10 <<http://www.reformation-today.org/papers/ibc.pdf>>, p. 1 [accessed 04 October 2011].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1 [accessed 4th October 2011].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9 [accessed 4th October 2011].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9 [accessed 4th October 2011].

Theologian Nicholas Healy would contend alongside Arthurs' view that some changes in ecclesiology, particularly in communicating faith to a postmodern world, are necessary. However, he maintains that the one distinctive within both theology and communication which must remain, even in the face of cultural changes, is the concept of truth. He suggests that the Church only actually has a valid voice when it "acknowledges and follows Jesus as the center of all truth."¹⁸ Healy's argument is that within a postmodern horizon, the proposal that a "universal, tradition-free rationality by which one might progress towards timeless truths is unsustainable."¹⁹ In what could be seen as an aggressive response to postmodernity and religious plurality, Healy also proposes that the Christian narrative is not only true, but needs to actively debate and ultimately absorb all other narratives, particularly those narratives which would attempt to challenge it.²⁰

The refusal to accept postmodernism's precepts is argued by David Liftin, from the perspective that postmodernism itself is not at all as tolerant and relative as is being promoted by those supporting postmodern viewpoints.²¹ Liftin disagrees with the process of argumentation concerning a view which is considered 'right' over a view which is considered 'wrong', in that it should not be relegated to being labelled as a modernistic practice. He also calls into question any epistemological stance (referring to postmodernism) which would rule such modes of thought out of order.²² The very idea of postmodernism challenging Christianity in general is robustly faced by Michael Saward, who reasons that the Christian, of whatever ecclesiological persuasion, should "disembowel" the runt of postmodernism as just another piglet from the litter of existentialism.²³

Those from within the contemporary Church who refuse to associate, integrate and liaise with postmodernism base their stance on an allegiance to their interpretation of biblical concepts of truth and morality. A redemptive-Christocentric approach to the

¹⁸ Nicholas M. Healy, *Christ, Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ David Liftin in Brian McLaren and David Liftin, 'Emergent Evangelism: The Place of Absolute Truth in a Postmodern World – Two Views' in *Christianity Today*, 48:11 (Nov. 2004) <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/14.42.html?start=1>> [accessed 16 May 2012].

²² *Ibid.*, [accessed 16th May 2012].

²³ Michael Saward, 'At Root, It's a Matter of the Theology' in *The Post-Evangelical Debate*, ed. by Graham Cray (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 75-95 (p. 95).

Bible as final authority also plays its part, and as Sward suggests, culture may change and emerge, but the reliance on the Bible as final authority should cause Christianity to rebuff the claims of postmodernism.²⁴

²⁴ Sward plays this thought out in greater depth in the chapter noted above.