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POSTMODERNISM & THE EMERGENT CHURCH

Rethinking the Twenty-first Century Evangelical Church
There is substantial rethinking about "the church" at the outset of the twenty-first century. It is about self-definition, what "evangelical" means, as well as what our cultural role in society should be. Such a "rethinking" conference was held at Wheaton College Graduate School in 2004. Titled "The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," the gathering was a mainline evangelical self-evaluation. Its goal was a reconsideration of the church's New Testament essence, purpose, and its very structure, form and doctrine.

In the introduction to the published book of conference addresses, the organizers state that the essential issue is "whether an 'evangelical' doctrine of the church exists, or for that matter, is even possible." They observe that contemporary evangelicals often fragment over ecclesiastical-doctrinal issues, such as the nature of salvation and sanctification--and issues of traditions as codified in the Reformed, Wesleyan-Holiness, Pentecostal, Anabaptist, and non-denominationalism.

Since evangelical thought is frequently characterized as "in crisis" or even "non-existent," the planners believed they could no longer ignore the question of what constitutes "an evangelical ecclesiology." In the broad disagreement about many issues, evangelical voices alternate between "selectively shrill or conspicuously mute," while "the current global situation makes North American disagreements about the church's place in God's kingdom not merely sad but deeply grave."[1]

Crisis in the Church in America
Recent research of more than 200,000 American churches reveals a bleak picture. Megachurches are many, but only about 1,000 churches average more than 2,000 attendees each week. The remaining majority of more than 200,000 churches are declining, including Evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox. On the average weekend, church attendance is about fifty-two million (17.5% of US population). However, since 1990 the population has grown fifty-two million. But during that same time, those fifty million new persons didn't increase the church attendance at all! No wonder, then, that America is the third largest post-Christian non-churched nation on earth![2] In 1963, songwriter Bob Dylan performed his trademark song "The Times They Are A-Changin'." As it turns out, his penetrating words were indeed prophetic of a new intellectual philosophy that is dramatically transforming these contemporary times.

Defining the Evangelical Church
"Evangelical" can be a difficult word to define. As an adjective, it simply means, "pertaining to the gospel," and was often used this way after the Reformation. As a noun, "evangelicalism" appeared early in the nineteenth century as a party within Protestant denominations. Early in the twentieth century, many churches used the term as part of their name.

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[1] Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 7-10.

[2] Lon Allison*, "The American Church in Crisis," Centerline,* Winter 2008, 1.

The most comprehensive definition of evangelicalism was delineated by David Bebbington. The four dominant emphases of evangelicalism include the Bible (biblicism), the cross (crucicentrism), conversion, and activism (including evangelism and social justice).[3] Most would agree that another dominant emphasis is spirituality, which includes "The Lordship of the Holy Spirit" and the necessity of the church community for fellowship and spiritual nourishment.

The greatest threat to contemporary evangelicalism and its dominant emphases is the philosophy of postmodernism, as it seeks to blend with and challenge orthodox theology. First, then, we will seek for an understanding of postmodernity, and then search for insight into how postmodernism influences the emergent/emerging church movement.

Part 1
POSTMODERNITY AND THE MODERN WORLD

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The foundations of the "modern era" were laid during the Renaissance after the Middle Ages (circa 1450) and the sixteenth-century Reformation. But the so-called "modern era" blossomed in the late eighteenth century Enlightenment or the "Age of Reason," as a kind of European philosophical "project" to account for all of life from within the bounds of independent rational experience over divine revelation and knowledge. This project is often referred to as "modernism." It follows, then, that "the modernist vision presupposed the power of rationality to discover objective truth."[4]

Early Thinkers Toward Postmodernity
Early in the modern era, a cadre of intellectuals began to question religious teachings and Christianity's idea of divine revelation as the basic source of authority and truth.

David Hume (1711-1776) is considered the "Father of Modern Skepticism." Based on the power of enlightenment reason, he denied the possibility of objective knowledge of a transcendent God in order to make room for "faith" that arises from our senses.

His radical skepticism aroused the critical mind of *Immanuel Kant (1724-1894)*, who reaffirmed that God cannot be know by intellectual reason (the "noumena"), but only by our senses (the "phenomena"). Kant also believed that within this great intellectual chasm exists a "categorical imperative" in everyone, a divine spark of free will with an immense sense of moral "oughtness." His intellectual scheme became the framework for a radical individualism of modern liberal thought, and the negative higher criticism of the biblical text.

Indebted to his philosophic predecessors, Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) codified the rules of the philosophic game by developing a grandiose system of logic that always moves through an evolutionary dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

But the most influential thinker of the modern era was *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (1768-1834). Considered the "Father of Theological Liberalism," his early religious life and theological notions of the subjective nature of philosophy began to take shape within the schools of Moravian pietism. Kant's "metaphysical agnosticism" impacted Schleiemacher's philosophical-

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[3] David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 21-40.

[4] Doug Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 2000), 35.

theological pursuit, necessitating a new authority for faith-reason located beyond traditional appeals to Scriptural authority.

Consequently, Schleiermacher redefined Christian doctrine into the inward sphere of human feelings, rendering Scripture's revelational propositions along with the historical creeds, invalid. Asserting that theology is essentially experiential and existential, he replaced the heart for head, and identified a "feeling of absolute dependence" as awesome oneness with God. With his broadened philosophic theology, he considered himself the "midwife of a new Christianity" by redirecting Christian theology and the church into the new world that was coming to be.

Nearing the End of Modernity

By mid-twentieth century many perceived that the soul of the "enlightenment experiment" was in deep trouble, and that modernity collapsed by the end of the 1960s, making way for postmodernity to blossom. In his informative work *A Primer On Postmodernism*,[5] Stanley Grenz has provided a historical overview leading up to contemporary postmodernism. The following represents highlights from his overview.

"The beginning of the end of modernity and the gestation period of post-modernity," hinges upon the great foe of modernity, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1844-1900). As "patron saint of postmodern philosophy," he affected the demise of the Enlightenment notion of truth. Abandoning his faith altogether, he asserted that "knowledge" or "truth" is a self-centered set of illusions. Nietzsche was a nihilist with no meaning to existence, no access to reality, and no true world but only a world of "perspectival appearance" from within.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) became the "most influential and flamboyant philosopher of postmodernism." A faithful disciple of Nietzsche and protagonist of knowledge as power, he thoroughly rejected the modern worldview while celebrating the postmodern paradigm of "complexity." Developing a hatred for religion as a young star in the French intellectual world, he immersed himself into the San Francisco gay community. Preoccupied with his own probable death from AIDS, in the end he sought a "total pleasure experience" that he associated with death.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) represents Nietzsche's most rigorous reinterpreter, whose goal was a negative deconstruction of language, by assuming hidden or double meanings in a text while denying any external meaning. As a literary theory, "deconstruction" is difficult to define. But ultimately, because of the nature of language, no text can have a fixed coherent meaning.

Richard Rorty (1931-2007) exhibits "the New Pragmatism" regarding the nature of truth. He attacks the modern and Christian "correspondence" ideal of truth (i.e., the logic that statements always have a clear truth value: an assertion is always either true or false according to the reality it purports to describe). Rorty's pragmatism gives "a distinctively postmodern twist" by asserting truth as what works, rather than what is theoretically correct. Moreover, Rorty denies any overarching metanarrative and the possibility of truth outside our own temporal context. And, he asserts, that the only valid guidelines we will ever be able to find are those of the community in which we participate—contending that it is impossible for us to rise above this circumscription. This, evidently, becomes his limited ethnocentric view of truth.

In the end, Rorty "completes the postmodern turn . . . and leads his followers into a new postmodern utopianism." His defined goal is "the attainment of an appropriate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement." No doubt, he sincerely believes this humanitarian goal is the best we can attain.

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[5] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 88-91, 123, 138, 150, 157-59.

Of course, these philosophies are in varying degrees insufficient to evangelical believers. But then, none of the leading postmodern thinkers believe that a real, personal God exists. Towering above this roster of keen philosophers stands Jesus of Nazareth, of the lineage of King David. Those of us who claim to be followers and disciples of this Jesus, who is the Messiah Lord, find much of these philosophies out of sync with the gospel Jesus taught and that his apostles proclaimed to the world. Therefore, our sure guide to philosophical search is by God's Word and God's Spirit.

Contemporary Postmodernism

"The news of modernity's death has been greatly exaggerated,"[6] raising the question whether this is a new age or the end of and old one. The widespread tendency to categorically dichotomize modernity and postmodernity by assuming that the former has now been replaced by the latter, begs the question whether such makes sense or is even possible. To some, the advent of postmodernity is really modernism radically intensified, or "gone to seed."

What is clear is that postmodernity proclaims a new way of thinking about how humans think and act, and a new way of thinking about Christianity itself. This mega-shift in the approach to truth results in an annihilation of the possibility of knowing objective reality. The notion that all claims to truth are no more than different perspectives from within each person's own reality is now commonly assumed, a kind of "absolute abhorrence of the absolute."[7]

Toward Defining Postmodernism

Nowadays "post" is hitched to about any noun or adjective. Usually meaning later in time, "posts" may take on the life of "buzz words"—impressive words with an aura of being "with it" and used by an in-group—but often having imprecise meaning. There is post-enlightenment, post-Protestant, post-denominational, post-liberal, post-evangelical and post-conservative. Yes, and post-Christian. Although a basic assumption of postmodernism is an inherent ability to move from one plateau of achievement to another, the word-concept is difficult to define. One social scientist remarked, "the term post-modern is employed so broadly that it seems to apply to everything and to nothing all at once."[8]

Prevailing Complexity about Postmodernity

Broadly, then, postmodernist terminology has been used by philosophers and social scientists to refer to aspects of contemporary culture, art, economics, and social conditions that result from unique features of late twentieth and early twenty first century. These include globalization, consumerism, the commoditization of knowledge, and the fragmentation of authority.

Consequently, many scholars believe that postmodernity is rarely understood. And, because of the diversity of images and definitions, postmodernism divides Christians into polar opposites—between those who gravitate to it and those who are repulsed by it. Notwithstanding, evangelical philosophy professor Myron Penner believes that since the concept is so varied and complex it is really too simplistic to presume a vast dichotomy, and responses to the problem come from both philosophy and theology.

Naturally, the reactions of the Christian community to postmodernity are often grounded solely in theology. Still, Penner reminds that "ever since St. Paul was authorized as an apostle of

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[6] James K. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping A Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

[7] Ibid., Groothuis, 69.

[8] R. Douglas Geivett, in, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 157.

Jesus Christ in the first century, the Christian church has had its intellectuals and scholars—its theologians and philosophers . . . [and that] this vision of the Christian intellectual entails that the Christian philosopher and theologian have complementary tasks."[9] Although philosophy and theology need to be balanced wherever they can, because of the evangelical commitment to the authority of the Scripture philosophy must give priority to the theology of the Word.

Another way to help unravel the many forms of postmodernism is to understand them as attempts to explain the inability of reason to resolve fundamental questions of human life. But in the postmodern mindset, there is *relativism* (truth varies from person to person), *constructivism* (truth is constructed, not discovered), *pragmatism* (truth is whatever helps us accomplish what we want), and *nihilism* (there is no right answer)."[10]

So, as postmodern terminology becomes ever more fuzzy, I believe we need a constant reminder that in some ways the vocabulary of postmodernism isn't altogether new. Though the notion of "postmodernism" was probably coined during the 1930s, it was evidently in the 1960's radical counter-culture movement when the mood gained its strength. And even though Friedrich Nietzsche predicted God's death at the end of the nineteenth century, in the 1960s a few theological "pallbearers" aroused a gathering of scholars propagating the death of God. Professor J. J. Altizer wrote *The Gospel of Christian Atheism,* asserting God's death in a metaphorical-literary way. Evangelical scholars like John W. Montgomery termed the phenomenon "theo-thanatology" and played the role of evangelical "coroners" in repudiating the absurd drama. In the heat of the times, I attended a "Death of God" public debate at the University of Chicago's famous Rockefeller Chapel, featuring fiery evangelical professor Montgomery versus quiet-natured J. J. Altizer. My take on the debate? It seemed like a knockout, as professor Altizer hardly knew what hit him.

After the 60s and into the 90s, the immense manufacturing of the information society created a new worldview some refer to as "McWorld," resulting in a mass culture and global economy.

Stanley Grenz reminds that the resulting postmodern ethos has become "centerlessness" in tossing aside objective truth. The result is that all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are viewed as equally valid because all are equally *invalid.* Likewise, someone noted, nobody objects to a non-doctrinal Christianity since there is nothing to object to. For sure, the postmodern articulation of the Christian gospel will be post-rationalistic.[11]

Postmodernism, then, reflects a new style of celebrating diversity, eclecticism, and a new tolerance for everyone's beliefs. New ways of viewing reality have developed into "multiple realities" while knowledge is replaced with "interpretation." The result is that the all-encompassing universe of the modern era is now replaced with "multi-verses" in postmodernism's new constructions of reality. The notion of a universal human history has become an illusion.[12]

A hardcore postmodern deconstructive philosophy has as its goal to expose truth claims as oppressive, especially of the Christian faith and its metanarratives considered to be fatally compromised by internal contradictions.

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[9] Myron. B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 15.
[10] Heath White, *Postmodernism 101* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 49.
[11] Ibid., Grenz, 163-64.
[12] Ibid., 16-19, 53.

The Postmodern Paradigm Shift

In summary, postmodernist assumptions can be clustered into six ideals, some of which may have positive dimensions: (1) rejection of negative evaluations of spirituality and religion, (2) the impossibility of objectivity of interpretation, (3) ideological pluralism since no one religious worldview contains absolute truth, (4) rejection of any overarching metanarrative, (5) emphasis on the aesthetic, symbolic, and ancient tradition, (6) the importance of human communities in shaping our interpretive perspectives, and (7) language as determinative of thought and meaning.[13] I would add another, (8) the flattening of hierarchies. We should note that Christians in general and the Bible in particular have historically valued narrative, symbolism, the aesthetic, the importance of community, and ancient tradition.

Moreover, wise Christians have been flattening hierarchies since being influenced by the writings of some of the emancipationists in the late nineteenth century—but more fundamentally, by a fresh and unbiased gender exegesis of the relevant Scriptures. The founding of Christians For Biblical Equality (CBE) in the 1960s continues to excellently influence top evangelical scholars who exegete biblical texts that traditionally understood women as patriarchally-gendered in submission to men. The liberation resulting from balanced egalitarian scholarship continues to develop alongside the generally postmodern ideal of gender equality. And, Christians once too involved in the negative aspects of modernist hierarchalism are increasingly recapturing the biblical dimensions of gender equality (cf. wwwcbeinternational.org).

How Postmodernity Eclipses Objective Truth[14]

The annals of postmodernism portray the eclipse of objective truth . . .

In its critical character—by the absence of meaning (everyone creates their own meaning)
In its moral character—by relativism and the emptiness of convictions (nobody is wrong)
In its societal character—by individualism and pluralism (everybody is right)
In its religious character—by universalism and sentimentalism (all religions are equal)
In its practical character—by pragmatism (the end justifies the means)

PART 2
THE EMERGENT CHURCH MYSTIQUE

The renewal mobilization called "emergent" and/or "emerging church" has burst upon the scene at the outset of this twenty-first century. As with postmodernism, anyone attempting to analyze and critique the emergent revolution faces a formidable problem—in part because the phenomena is quite new, the literature is already massive, and the message is oftentimes conflicted.

A variation on the theme or perhaps even overlap is termed "revolution," which is about "repudiating tepid systems and practices of the Christian faith and introducing a wholesale shift in how faith is understood, integrated, and influencing the world." So states George Barna in his

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[13] William Kleim, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 71-72.

[14] Grant R. Osborne, adapted from "The Unpacking of the Hermeneutical Spiral," February, 1997, delivered at the Evangelical Theological Society regional meeting at Moody Bible Institute.

book *Revolution,* asserting that the divergence is about cultural change and spiritual transformation—about an explosion of spiritual energy and activity.[15]

"Mystique" speaks of complex and somewhat mystical attitudes and feelings surrounding persons or institutions. "Emerging" connotes the idea of being discovered or coming into light or prominence. But as a movement, the "emergent church" is difficult to define. Some insist it is a movement having a "conversation" that echoes a changing of cultures—a progressive force of cultural awareness and capitulation driving new and cutting-edge churches to embrace new cultural methodologies in communicating Christianity to postmodern people. A spokesperson suggests the participants are "a gathering of wanderers" who aim for nothing less than "a new kind of Christian" and even Christianity itself.

Further complicating the matter are the similar words "emergent," often used synonymously with "emerging." Emergent is a website called Emergent Village in Minneapolis and first coordinated by Tony Jones (www.emergentvillage.com). They explain that "The word 'emergent' is normally an adjective meaning coming into view, arising from, occurring unexpectedly, requiring immediate action (hence its relation to 'emergency'), characterized by evolutionary emergence or crossing a boundary. . . . Emergent Village defines itself as a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ."[16] In Britain the newer descriptive terminology added to "emergent" is "altworship."

Differences between these groups are fuzzy. So much so that someone noted that trying to capture and understand the thinking "of the swirling waters that are the emergent movement is a little like trying to nail jello to a tree." Meanwhile, some are debating on the internet whether either of "emerging" or "emergent" is heretical. An attempt to categorize the movement should be of help.

Five Scenarios of the Emergent Movement

Exhibit One represents "Vintage Relevants"
This group centers on ways of doing church with new ideals and worship forms in order to contextualize the gospel for the local postmodern culture. Worship includes "vintage" liturgical elements of "candles, couches, and coffee," with art and creative music in casual comfortable surroundings. The goal is "experiential and multi-sensory worship gatherings" that include the offering as an experience of worship, creative Scripture readings and meditative prayer stations. The Lord's Supper may be upheld as the ultimate experiential worship act of the Christian family, gathering around arranged tables following the proclamation of the Word.

The leading representative of this scenario has probably been Dan Kimball of the Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz. His descriptive book *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*[17] includes practical principles of ministry within an innovative call to return to "vintage Christianity," with suggestions on how to transition from old ways of doing church into a new kind of church in a postmodern culture.

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[15] George Barna, *Revolution: Worn-out on Church? Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream: Tyndale/Barna, 2005), VIII.

[16] www.emergentvillage.com

[17] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

Exhibit Two represents "Reconstructive Revolutionaries"
This party is passionate about intimate expressions, methods, and structures of church life in contrast to the common institutional and business-like church models. This scenario encourages "organic" house churches (with differing notions of what "organic" means), while other groups may be involved in alternative "intentional" communities of families that live near one another. Intentional organismic bodies usually oppose the notion of paid clergy and sometimes elder leadership for fear of hierarchical control, and because it would contradict being an "organic" people. Moreover, this perspective is very critical of what "institutional" churches stand for and how they function. The small book by evangelical sociologist Christian Smith, *Going to the Root: 9 Church Proposals for Radical Church Renewal,*[18] represents a good start on the theme.

Rob Bell is teaching pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church that gathers more than 10,000 people in a massive converted mall outside Grand Rapids. It is one of the earliest and most influential emergent churches with a particular teaching/preaching emphasis on "revolution." The megachurch spawns many new small groups and house churches regularly, and reaches 50,000 weekly on line. One of the most positive advances of emergent leaders as Rob Bell is their ability to totally overcome centuries of gender bias and discrimination against womanhood and their ecclesial subservience. In contrast to Mark Driscoll (below), Bell and the other leaders welcome women as elders, preachers, and leaders in this vast congregation. They have joined the much earlier revolution with which many of us are involved that began in the mid-twentieth century (Christians for Biblical Equality).

Researcher George Barna in his book *Revolution: Worn-out on Church? Finding vibrant faith beyond the walls of the sanctuary*[19]defines revolution as "repudiating tepid systems and practices of the Christian faith and introducing a wholesale shift in how faith is understood, integrated, and influencing the world." Thus, he is passionately opposed to the NT norm of the local church, of regular church meetings and even worship, and understands leadership as a non-necessity.

Moreover, Frank Viola and George Barna co-authored the provocative book *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the roots of our church practices.*[20] Both authors are involved in and promote the house church as a fundamental kingdom model. Frank is an influential voice in the contemporary house church movement, and shares most of Barna's views regarding the church. Both interact with the Emergent movement but are not necessarily or directly affiliated with it.

Frank Viola's *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* is promoted as a follow-up to *Pagan Christianity*. But the question remains—did Viola sufficiently research the unsubstantial and shifting meanings of "imagining" and "dreaming" in the face of the solid and non-shifting Christian orthodoxy based on the revelational text of God-breathed Scripture? (i.e., we don't build orthodox theology or ecclesiology on "imagination" but on "revelation") Eddie Gibbs has it right that the church must *re-image* itself for comprehensive self-understanding. Basic to the biblical data is the image of the church as the organic body of Christ.

Exhibit Three represents "Emergent Revisionists"
This band seeks to revise the Christian faith and the gospel itself. Their fundamental orientation is postmodern, while their philosophic-theological dialog questions traditional and historic evangelical doctrines and assumptions while claiming to be committed to the early ecumenical creeds. This scenario is represented by the website Emergent Village in Minneapolis,

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[18] Christian Smith, *Going to the Root: 9 Proposals for Radical Church Renewal* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1992).

[19] Ibid., Barna.

[20] Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices.* (Carol Stream: Tyndale/Barna, 2008).

coordinated the past few years by Tony Jones[21]and is echoed in his book *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*. The work of this website has tended to solidify the movement under the now generally accepted term "emergent." Doug Pagitt is pastor at Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, and shares his pilgrimage in his book *A Christianity Worth Believing*; and Brian McLaren, leading spokesperson and author of the emergent movement, is pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in suburban Washington DC.

Exhibit Four represents the "New Reformed"
This is a cluster whose reformed theology is the major driving force. The key representative of this aggregate is Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church of Seattle. He is co-founder of the Acts 29 Network of Reformed churches. Driscoll withdrew from working with the Emergent Village in 2001, suspecting they intend to revise evangelical orthodoxy with an open and experimental approach to theology.[22] In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller vaguely depicts Driscoll as "a cussing pastor." Although brash and blunt in his preaching style, many are more dismayed at his brittle "bad boy" gospel of macho masculinity that he claims Jesus modeled, along with its attending put-down of Christian womanhood and their gifts.

Exhibit Five depicts "Divergent Emergents"
This cadre is avowedly bypassing historic Christianity for a new postmodern replacement. Some emergents experience a divergent disposition that began with their earlier experiences of Christianity, but has not formed into an evangelical-orthodox frame of mind. Some of the dramatic teacher-leaders who brazenly and voraciously expand on the divergent theme in their writing, teaching and creative community experiences—once preached what they now fully condemn.

Example A- Peter Rollins is the brilliant founder of the Ikon Community in Belfast, self-described as "iconic, apocalyptic, heretical, emerging and failing." He holds multiple degrees in philosophy that include post-structural theory, and creates and directs "theodrama and transformational art." The many postmodern and post-Christian liturgies at Ikon include such as congregants forgiving God's faults and then pronouncing judgment on God himself; or walking outside to burn images of God in a trash barrel, echoing his book titled *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Because of Rollin's mystical-deconstructionist perspective on God, Kevin DeYoung remonstrates against his "profoundly unbiblical, unevangelical, and un-Christian" radical skepticism of the possibility of knowing God.[23]

Example B- is the influence of Spencer Burke (and Barry Taylor) in their book *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*[24] (2006). Burke is creator of theooze.com and host of Soularize emergent conference; Taylor teaches at Fuller Seminary. McLaren wrote the foreword, and Tony Jones avers he won't

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[21] www.emergentvillage.com "Tony Jones Blesses Gay Marriage & Ordination." Jones articulated his beliefs about homosexuality on his blog, stating that he now believes "that GLBTQ can live in accord with biblical Christianity (at lease as much as any of us can!) and that their momogamy can and should be sanctioned and blessed by church and state" (GLBTQ stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning). Jones no longer speaks on behalf of EV.

[22] Colin Hansen, "Pastor Provocateur," *Christianity Today*, September, 2007, 46.

[23] Kevin DeYoung (and Ted Kluck), *Why We're Not Emergent (by two guys who should be),* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), 123.

[24] Spencer Burke & Barry Taylor, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 2006)

communicate with any critic who hasn't read this book—since he's sure it's the only book that adequately relates what the emerging church is all about.

A caveat: It is critically wise to seek the truth—but extraordinarily foolish to refuse to find it and not to refute falsehood along the way. *A Heretic's Guide* is a "spiritual" example of the irrational ambiguity that results. Spencer Burke says he is a universalist and so doesn't need to connect to any religion to find God. "Faith is not a requirement [since] nothing stands between us and God's grace . . . the God I connect with does not assign humans to hell . . . religion doesn't really work for me anymore." Moreover, "what you believe about Jesus or the work he accomplished is irrelevant."[25] It should not be surprising, then, that Spencer affirms pantheism, the notion that God is in all, and that we are in God here on earth. We are like God.[26] Consequently, the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin is a repugnant thing that we didn't ask him to do!

Scot McKnight, a critic somewhat sympathetic to the emergent movement, asks "Is Spencer a "heretic?" McKnight sees nothing contrary to it since denial of God's personhood is to deny the essential Trinitarian God. "Is he a Christian? He says he is." McKnight adds that Spencer does not believe in Christ's death and resurrection and sees "no reason to think Spencer believes in the gospel as the NT defines gospel."[27]

Example C- Less known is the influence and writing of British scholar Steve Chalke (with Allan Mann) in their book *The Lost Message of Jesus* (2003). Chalke works with the corresponding emergent movement in England and is founder of the *Oasis* organization, and is considered an effective and fiery communicator.

The more one studies postmodernism and the emergent movement the more one will perceive three extraordinary realities being deconstructed before our eyes and from historic Christianity: (1) the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his exclusive salvation, (2) the historic understanding of the penal substitutionary atonement, and (3) the reality of divine judgment and eternal punishment. Like others in this companionship, Chalke rids himself of the essentials of historic Christianity. But why do postmodernists typically follow the same trajectory from faith to heresy? Classical Liberalism set the stage: First establish "God is love" as the fundamental, simplistic, and benign assertion above all. Then deconstruct all doctrines to seemingly fit the favorite assertion. Chalke denies any real Fall into sinfulness since God declared all he made was good, and so Jesus believed in original *goodness* (rather than original sin).[28]

From this frame of mind it follows that the cross and penal substitution have become a form of cosmic child abuse "since it stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love,' and makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies."[29] In this way love becomes the all-controlling attribute, without any understanding of the actual biblical emphasis of God's essence as his righteous holiness. Rather, the supreme reality of God's righteousness and holiness is domesticated into simply God's pain as he gazes upon the broken world. While "the judgment [and] the wrath of God, spoken of repeatedly in Scripture now becomes 'a personal act of violence toward humankind . . . [and] what lies at the heart of Christian confessionalism is now 'a form of cosmic child abuse.'"[30]

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[25] Ibid., 130-31.

[26] Ibid., 195.

[27] Scot McKnight, in Kevin DeYoung (and Ted Kluck), *Why We're Not Emergent,* 121-22.

[28] Steve Chalke & Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zonervan, 2003) 67.

[29] Ibid., 182-82.

[30] Ibid., D. A. Carson, 185.

The message being fabricated by the "divergent emergents" is not the same one Jesus and the apostles created and proclaimed, but is as the apostle Paul identified as "another gospel."

Example D- Phyllis Tickle, a lay eucharistic minister in the Episcopal Church, sets forth her small but significant book *The Great Emergence* as a monumental transition that seeks to answer what it is, how it comes, and where it is going. Tickle is an "internationally renowned religion expert" who assesses the new amalgamation of Emergent Christianity and asserts that it must discover some authority base or delivery system of its own. The ever present question "where is the authority?" remains paramount to her, since most issues are subsets of it.

Steeped in religious philosophy, Tickle believes there are two overarching but complementary questions about the "Great Emergence" that are upon us (1) "what is the humanness of the human?" and (2) "what is the relation of all religions to one another?" The author concludes that it can't be said that we've truly entered into any kind of "post-Emergence stability" until we've answered both of these questions.

Tickle's theology evidently reflects a liberalized ecumenical postmodernism wherein "the nature of the atonement and the tenants of an angry God who must be appeased will need be solved "or the question of evil's origins are up for grabs." But I don't see where this matters in her theology since in the future the author assures we'll all be considered equally as the children of God. Moreover, emergents will rewrite Christian theology that will be far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything in the last 1800 hundred years!

Tickle has many ideas—not necessarily good or Christian ones. Her odd assertion that "doctrine as a codified part of Christianity was born under Constantine" begs the question whether she is familiar with the original and codified doctrine of Jesus and his apostles, or perhaps doesn't believe he is the Son of God as claimed.

Tickle's idea of history reflects a kind of jack-in-the-box God who arbitrarily pops up when, according to Anglican Bishop Dyer's notion, "about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity become intolerable and must be shattered to cause renewal and new vital forms."[31]

Tickle and other postmoderns believe the ultimate solution is to clean out the church's attic and have a "giant Rummage Sale" to clear away the church's junk. Thus, numerous congregations are reshuffling and moving to embrace emergent and postmodern thought *"while melding it with extant and/or historic expressions of the faith."* These are the *"hyphenateds,"* as in presbymergents, methomergents, luthermergents, baptimergets anglimergents, concludes Tickle.

A Postscript

In October 2008, the Emergent Village released a letter from the board regarding the elimination of Tony Jones's position in order to reclaim the Village's founding purpose as an "egalitarian social-networking organization." Brian McLaren says there have been ongoing questions about the name "emergent," and that for some has allowed them to remain in the evangelical world. For others, he admitted, the name has become an epithet for theological heresy or cultural trendiness. The board will be working on a "discernment process" to determine Emergent Village's future.

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[31] Phyllis Tickle, *The Geat Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), references from pp. 13, 16-17, 72-3, 150, 162; Part 1 on The Great Emergence: What is it? (13-17) fixates on the Bishop's "historic" enterprise of Christianity's "Rummage Sales," combined with other questionable assumptions more related to the philosophical than the theological.

Christianity Today[32] also reported that "Tony Jones Blesses Gay Marriage & Ordination" as he articulated his decision on his blog, stating that he now believes "that GLBTQ can live in accord with biblical Christianity and that their momogamy can and should be sanctioned and blessed by church and state." Moreover, well-known emergent blogger Andrew Jones has dropped the *emergent* label from his discussion "since the word no longer communicates what he wants it to."

Of further interest is the fact that emerging pastor Dan Kimball together with professor and blogger Scot McKnight are forming a new network provisionally called *Origins*, dedicated to "friends, pioneers, innovators and catalysts who want to dream and work for the gospel together rather than alone." Evidently, the five scenarios of the emergent movement may not all continue to emerge together.

Jesus, the Postmodern we thought we knew
Jesus is the central figure of the Bible. In his gospel he presents a clear and complete account of his attitude toward the Old Testament (Lu 24:32, 44-45). He taught that the OT was true, its teachings authoritative and its words inspired. Jesus not only authenticated the Older Testament but the New as well. But many today still have only a superficial knowledge of the Older Testament, and thus usually a convoluted one.

Since the evidence that Christ said and believed these things is patently inescapable, contemporary Christians must either come to terms with it or virtually give up their professed faith in Christ as their divine teacher, since much of his teaching contradicts the postmodern turn. In his powerful book *The Goodness of God*, John Wenham alerts that Christians must eschew easy answers—in particular those answers that dismiss the uncomfortable features of the Bible. Easy answers won't be right, while answers that fit the facts are often profoundly disturbing.

In fact, we see through a darkened glass as self-centered finite people born into a fallen world, not realizing we are essentially children acting foolish when we tell God what he should be like and do. We need not defend God's revelation; rather, we must clear away misunderstandings and show the weakness of the alternatives.[33] Several stumbling blocks to postmodern emergents are noticeable:

The stumbling block of the New Testament stands in the way of emergent postmoderns
We have already seen how Jesus completely embraced the trustworthiness and authenticity of the OT. Thus, it would be nonsense to use the Jesus of history as a yardstick for criticizing the Old Testament. For some emergent postmoderns the Jesus presented in the gospels becomes problematic. But it is fallacious to regard the OT as "bloodthirsty" over against the "gentle and loving" Jesus of the New. In reality, *of the two the New Testament is the more terrible*, for the Old Testament seldom speaks of anything beyond temporal judgments. Thus to the Old covenant writers the impending wrath is often a judgment on the present historical plane—but to the New Covenant writers it is usually a judgment beyond the grave.[34]

In the Gospels, it is the Son of God who pronounces eternal punishment. Moreover, it is in the New Testament where early believers Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead in church for lying and deceit. In fact, in each of the Gospels, the Acts, in Paul's letters, and in Hebrews, James, Peter, John and Jude, strong and unambiguous teachings abound about life after death and about the judgment and the "wrath to come." John freely asserts the "wrath of God" rests on the

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[32] *Christianity Today,* "Emergent's Divergence," December, 2009, 13-14.
[33] John Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1974), 9-10.
[34] Ibid., 16-17.

unbeliever, while Paul announces forthrightly that non-believers "are storing up wrath against yourselves for the day of God's wrath." The Revelation radiates with judgment in lurid colors: "the wine of God's wrath is poured unmixed in the cup of his anger" as "the smoke of their torment goes up forever." The climax comes when Jesus ("Faithful and True") conquers on a white horse when "with justice he judges and makes war with a sharp sword from his mouth," all in the context of the marriage supper's shouts of "hallelujahs and praises" to God. Ask any postmodern teacher to explain these realities without mystifying, reapplying, or simply denying the whole.

The Stumbling-block of Jesus' teaching contradicts emergents' sentimentalizing
'The temptation for sentimentalizing Jesus has been indulged to such an extent during the past hundred years that a totally erroneous mental picture of Jesus has largely become the common property of theologians, preachers, church folk and non-Christians. The majority of our contemporaries genuinely think Christ taught that God was the loving Father of all mankind, who would make everything come out all right for everyone in the end."[35] Barring another great awakening, postmodern emergents are treading down the same pathway of illusion.

The clarity of Jesus' teaching on divine wrath and coming judgment
Jesus nowhere taught that all would be well for everyone in the end no matter what they did, whom they believed in or what religion they liked. He spoke clear warnings again and again with compassion and concern of judgment and the danger of losing their very souls. Jesus spoke of sins that would not be forgiven, of eternal fire of hell and outer darkness, a place of wailing and gnashing teeth.

The full weight of Jesus' teaching on judgment is incomprehensible to many; but then many aren't aware of its reality. In fact, Jesus proclaimed far more dreadful warnings of judgment and hell than Old Testament writers and prophets ever could—and showed no concern to soften or sentimentalize his radical teachings. My Anabaptist brothers and sisters talk much about the radical peace/pacifist teachings of Jesus—but have great trouble accepting these texts. One brother simply told me that these words cannot be what Jesus taught.

To experience the overwhelming weight of the accumulated body of Jesus' teaching in his gospels, twentieth-century architect of evangelicalism Kenneth Kantzer[36] stressed that since the Lord so often and deliberately used the most vivid images possible, every serious Christian should look up every relevant passage and write them out—resulting in a lasting and indelible impression.

In fact, these texts add up to more than 100 verses (they are listed and categorized at the bottom of page 20 in *The Goodness of God*, by John Wenham). *The hard data becomes even more surprising when we learn that Jesus spoke a dozen more times of the dark realities of coming judgment than about heaven and those happy thoughts and promises awaiting believers!*

"Consider the kindness and severity of God"
This line from Paul is emphatic on both "kindness AND severity of God" (Rom 11:22), and should get everybody's full attention. But without the balance of *severity,* the whole picture is misrepresented and theologically lopsided, since "our troubles arise not from the weakness of

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[35] Ibid., 19-20.

[36] Kenneth Kantzer, in lost class notes when a Theology professor and Dean at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

the Bible's morals, but from their severity. They are felt to be difficulties by us, not because of our moral sensitivity, but because of our moral obtuseness."[37] The incomprehensible marvel here is that such a sin-hating God should love sinful rebels enough to offer the blood of his incarnate Son as satisfaction and forgiveness for our sins. "The idea that a stern Old Testament God stands in contrast to the merciful and loving God of the New Testament is a travesty hardly deserving notice . . . Indeed, the New Testament itself in no way minimizes the emphasis on the righteousness of God or the severity of his judgment. God is not a feeble sentimentalist. The revelation of the Gospel is also a revelation of the wrath of God in Romans 1:17-18."[38]

The Postmodern Jesus is but a shallow caricature of the real incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. An urgent caveat needs to be heralded about the astounding misconceptions of Jesus rapidly mounting within the swirling emergent opinions of its leaders. The postmodern die has already been cast, and the postmodern Gospel is now being rewritten. Show me an emergent author that proclaims hell's reality, and where emergent writers tell the truth about future judgment.

The cushioning power of believers' judgment
Christians who take the doctrine of judgment seriously and personally are learning the surprising reality that it is the most assuring and comforting of all the hard teachings of Scripture. When the Lord came to see how wicked the people of Sodom really were in preparation to destroy them, Abraham confronted him and said, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous and the wicked alike! *Will not Judge of all the earth do right?"*

Abraham began to plead at noontime that if 50 righteous people were there, would God agree to spare the city. And the Lord did. Then Abraham continued to plead if only 45, then if 40, then if only 30, and only 20, and God agreed to withhold judgment for the righteous' sake. But then Abraham said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten righteous can be found there?" The Lord answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

At nighttime, Abraham went home. The rest of the awesome story is told. "And the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah" as wickedness reached its limits. God spared the righteous remnant by Abraham's intercession. But Christians would benefit to wrestle with Abraham's critical question "Will not the Judge of all he earth do right?

Millennia later Paul wrote about the believers' judgment: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10 TNIV). The critical point of all the texts on believers' judgment is the assurance that God is Just. God's justice and love are co-joined because when rightly understood, his justice/judgment is his love in doing the absolutely right thing. Here we are impacted with the awesome cushioning power of the believers' judgment. It is as a soft promise-pillow under our heads that at our judgment he will rid forever the "bad" (down to "even all tears wiped away") and will reward "what is due because of the good in our lives, as all the perplexing discrepancies of history are removed.

The incomprehensible joy and exhilaration of this coming day for God's children is radically different from the Medieval art and sculpture that reflects Roman Catholicism's portrayal of judgment in terms of terror connected to its penitential systems. Fortunately, the Reformers

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[37] Ibid., Wenham, 86-87.
[38] G. W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1982), 501.

regained the biblical perspective and in the creeds of Westminister, Heidleberg, etc. reflect and restore the true comfort of the judgment for believers.

PART 3
DEFINING FEATURES OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH MOVEMENT
There are at least five defining features of the emergent church movement as follows:

I- ITS PHILOSOPHICAL MOOD IS POST-MODERN
To better understand this claim we must discern how and why postmodernism impacts contemporary evangelical Christianity, particularly as related to the emergent church movement.

Four Postmodern Theologies
The postmodern mood procreates different modes of theology, most reflecting a departure from solid evangelical foundations. Millard Erickson describes them as follows:
   (1) *Deconstructive postmodern theology* accepts the more radical postmodern philosophies and deconstructs or eliminates such traditional doctrines as "God."
   (2) *Constructive or revisionary postmodern theology* rejects the traditional worldview in order to build a new worldview on different grounds and revised concepts as in Process theology and some Narrative theologies.
   (3) *Liberationist postmodern theology* concerns itself less with worldviews, but primarily with the transformation of societal structures as in various Liberation theologies.
   (4) *Conservative or restorative postmodern theology* rejects elements as relativism, subjectivism, and reductionism. But it seeks to retain realism, the correspondence theory of truth and other values rooted in pre-modern times (*The correspondence theory*: truth is what represents or corresponds to reality. It is present in those propositions that correctly correspond to the state of affairs that they claim to present).

In view of these differing theologies, the critical challenge among evangelical Protestant theologians "is the extent to which the statement of evangelical theology must be modified to contextualize it to postmodern culture—versus actually changing the way of doing theology or the content of it." Clearly, postmodernism is a mood, a new way of thinking about Christianity itself; and since the emergence of postmodernity "is affecting every area of intellectual endeavor, it is important for Christians to understand postmodernism and to construct a theology to evidence awareness of and response to it."[39]

   As an evangelical renewalist committed to the revitalization of Christ's church, I embrace the essential thesis of the fourth position. I am committed to the positive Reformational truth of the church as "reformed and always reforming," and thus affirm some of the positive criticisms of evangelicalism's past, along with its vitality being experienced in its continual renewal. While I'm appalled at the emergent movement's deconstruction of major biblical doctrines that are the foundation of what it is to be "evangelical," I hope an intelligent resistance will emerge against the darker postmodern philosophies/theologies and a more diligent search for the foundations in the Scriptures as revealed by the Word and Spirit. However, it is in a critical state of flux.

[39] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 164-69.

Changing theological terminologies in the evangelical postmodern mood
This twenty-first century has propagated a postmodern mood that encourages new and changing theological terminologies among those who consider themselves within the broad historic "evangelical" fold—causing a professed break in the common understanding of "conservative" evangelicalism.

In 2003, *The Post-Evangelical* [40] introduced this new label by arguing for a departure from old-line evangelicalism by the emergent church network. More recently, Roger Olson aggressively advances "post-evangelical" terminology in his 2007 book *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology.* Olson is a choice example of today's changing theological terminologies that bring confusion and great concern.

Olson doesn't like the common characterization of conservative evangelical theology as adhering to a supposed "received evangelical tradition" as an established position. By contrast, he proposes a theological openness as a postconservative agenda—open to subjecting any doctrine or practice to new scrutiny in light of new and fresh interpretations (not necessarily revelations) of Scripture. But what Olson really offers is a *progressive theology* that, in his words reverberates with "Postmodern Impulses in Postconservative Evangelical Theology."[41] To explicate this new vision an entire chapter is given to theological imbroglio, provocation, and perhaps a distancing from the essential understanding of "evangelical" itself.

On the other hand, The Evangelical Theological Society has a membership of nearly 3000 scholars, theologians, and pastoral leaders—and publishes a Journal that is a strong influence in evangelicalism to foster "*conservative* Biblical scholarship." While the term "conservative" connotes tendencies to be moderate and cautious, yet many other descriptions have been added over time, as combative, negative, narrow-minded, anti-intellectual and even "right-wing politics." Of course, this creates an unhappy dilemma for those of us who, for example, enthusiastically belong to the ETS but are not comfortable with these popular negative connotations. In some respects the word has become akin to how the word "fundamentalist" once was a pristine word but through times became a generally negative and irredeemable terminology, in that it sometimes reflects a frighteningly narrow mentality as well as a violent one. Because of these realities, with Billy Graham long ago many of us confessed, "I am not a fundamentalist." Consequently, as evangelical believers in postmodern times, we may find it necessary to identify ourselves more specifically and carefully.

OpenGodness and oopsTheology
One of the radical inclinations of "postconservative impulses" is the so-called "open" doctrine of God. It is as though a new kind of Christian deity has been established whom I refer to as-- "Welcome. God is Now Open."[42] Over the past few decades, OpenGodness has made deep inroads into segments of evangelicalism. It is a radical upgrade of the ancient dogma of Arminianism developed by Jacobus Arminius (1519-1605), who argued for the primacy of human free will—in view of a diminished God. Openness doctrine challenges the classic consensus of Christianity that God is wholly sovereign in his providential plan and in his complete knowledge. Instead, openness asserts that God is no longer sovereign because he knows the future only as partly settled and partly open to things he doesn't and can't know, predicated on human's free will.

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[40] Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (El Cajon: Emergent YSBooks, 2003).

[41] Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1007), 125-152.

[42] Del Birkey, "Welcome. God is Now Open" (8 ways OpenGod theologians got it wrong), unpublished paper, August, 2001.

OpenGod folks view this renewed view of the doctrine of God and divine revelation to be understood as primarily transformational in experiencing God rather than informational in informing us of his sovereign trinitarian being. This means that theology should be understood as a pilgrimage that is changing along the way. Admitted or not, divine error is now open to an "oops" of divine possibility. God may give up on humanity and change his mind, and decide not to return in triumphal consummation of redemptive history. OopsTheology is therefore a dramatic revisionist take on God and his salvation, and can reduce biblical prophecy to wishful thinking.

The emergent postmodern extravagancy factor

Postmodern leaders exhibit a tendency to assume that offensive and fallacious language will awaken to effect change. Traditional and even biblical boundaries are often obliterated, leaving it nearly impossible to grasp what an author is trying to teach. In arguing that evangelicals must embrace postmodernity, another postmodern writer wobbles far-off center and freely asserts that "God is not a being in himself, [but is] wholly other; God's voice is often equivocal; Christian truth is not, never was, and never will be propositional truth; When Jesus says he is 'the truth' he is not making a logical claim about himself."[43] Nearly every phrase in this statement can be challenged by biblical orthodoxy and sound evangelical exegesis.

Emergent leader Brian McLaren is further exercised about "conservative" or even "centrist" evangelicals, so he muses: "I don't think Jesus would be caught dead as a Christian, were he physically here today . . . I don't think Christians would like Jesus if he showed up today . . . I think we'd call him a heretic and plot to kill him, too."[44] Occasionally McLaren admits to exaggeration and tries to tone it down. Doggedly, nevertheless, he confesses that "I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) *often stimulate more thought than clarity*"[45] (emphasis mine).

Apparently, though, Paul the apostle wasn't impressed by balderdash. He wrote with crystal clarity that when the flute is played, "How will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? *So it is with you*. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air . . . If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker is a foreigner to me. *So it is with you*" (1 Cor 14:7, 9, 11-12).

A praxis re-orientation

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer asserts that "No dichotomy is as fatal to the notion of doctrinal theology as that of theory and practice . . . . The theory—practice distinction, together with the contrast between doctrine and life to which it gives rise, is toxic to Christian faith."[46] Thus, the age-old ruse of "orthodoxy versus orthopraxy" rises again as an old contrivance among postmodern evangelicals.

But praxis doesn't necessarily follow stated intentions. What does often follow is a usual redefining and readjusting of orthopraxy ("right living") over orthodoxy ("right doctrine") by

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[43] Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 81, 134, 142, 209, 213.

[44] Brian McClaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon: Youth Specialties, 2004), 79-80.

[45] Ibid., 23.

[46] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 13.

intentionally neglecting the latter as secondary and irrelevant. A noted weakness of postmodern Christianity is a poor understanding and remembrance of history. Classic orthodoxy has always insisted that living out the gospel's theology *is* rightly balanced Christianity.

As emergent communities seek to adapt to differing cultures and subcultures, the modus operandi of "performing the gospel" varies in different situations and involves a hazardous selectivity of principles that are readjusted to the environments' assumed needs. Several dangers lurk. *Relativism* promotes the theory that religion and morality are relative to the people who embrace them. *Pluralism* follows, philosophy asserting that no single viewpoint can be the explanatory system or view of reality that explains all of life. Scot McKnight aptly described this active attitude as an "avoid conformity and 'catch me if you can' attitude."[47]

Postmodernism & the global South/global North conundrum

In contrast to the postconservative argument of Roger Olson above, theologian Millard Erickson views the postconservative movement (which is essentially postmodern) as largely a negative development. Erickson, together with Paul Helseth and Justin Taylor have compiled *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (2005). They note that postconservatives are philosophically open to the notion that truth is a sociological construct depending on perspective. Moreover, they are like earlier forerunners who locate the essence of Christian identity in the experiential ethos of the believing community. And finally, historiographically, postconservatives claim that those who agree with them have stood in the historical center of the evangelical tradition of pietism, viewing doctrinal truth as secondary and validated only in the believing community, right or wrong.

But Erickson and the others are also concerned about the growing global South vs. global North divide. They note that postconservativism/postmodernism is presently limited to North American evangelicalism. In contrast, however, global South Christianity of Africa, Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe have little sympathy for the movement. Philip Jenkins clarifies that "as the center of gravity of the Christian world moves ever southward, the conservative traditions prevailing in the global South matter ever more."[48] This exploding Christianity is considerably more conservative than American Christianity, even to the point of Jenkin's chapter one title question: "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" This suggests that Christian theology will move toward a literal and even fundamentalist reading of the Bible from issues rising out of global South Christianity.

Moreover, global South evangelicalism is often a minority competing with other religions. Erickson takes note that postconservative/postmodern evangelicalism offers little bulwark against pluralism, which saps the vitality from evangelicalism. He also reminds that the word "evangelical" is becoming very elastic and is more frequently used as and adjective than a noun, and keenly puts the issue into focus: In the elevation of experiential ethos of a believing community over against the doctrinal truth claims that correspond to objective reality as such, how can the universal truthfulness of Christian experience be defended against the claims of committed followers from other religious traditions? After all, he posits, if the essence of evangelical and Christian identity is found in the experiential ethos of a community rather than revealed propositional revelation, *on what basis can Christians claim that their experience is universally true?*

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[47] Scot McKnight, "The Future or Fad? A Look at the Emerging Church Movement," *The Covenant Companion,* February, 2006, 15.

[48] Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (N.Y.: Oxford Uni. Press, 2006), 1-2.

II- ITS CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL FOCUS IS POST-EVANGELICAL
"A central feature of postmodernity is the breakdown of cultural traditions all over the world"[49]

Christian history is a two-thousand-year conversation between the church and the world, and has always been problematic. For sure, the emergent church advocates a culturally relevant Christianity. But shouldn't every church be a culturally relevant community? Yes, but "not since the Jesus movement of the early 1970s has a Christian phenomenon been so closely entangled with the self-conscious cutting edge of U.S. culture."[50] Consequently, "postmodern evangelical theology ties itself very closely to the present culture, allowing that culture to contribute even to the content of its theology. History shows that a theology that blends too fully with its culture tends to prosper and decline with that culture."[51]

Cultural situatedness
A significant insight of postmodernism is human situatedness: the state of our being human in the world as "situated, limited, and contingent" (in history, culture, religion, social class and gender). But this knowledge was already available and known by tradition, and in Scripture's doctrine of the Fall and original sin.

Notwithstanding, evangelicalism has created its own subculture and peculiar kind of inter-generational language, so that it becomes confused with biblical Christianity itself. This waywardness in Christ's church is what Scripture describes as cultural "worldliness." Surely, criticism by the postmodern emerging movement against the negative influences of culturalism within evangelical Christianity is justified and welcomed.

On the other hand, emergent literature describes itself as "engaging a post-Christian, postmodern culture to help Christians integrate their faith and life . . . [and] to navigate those cultural transitions . . . to the emerging postmodern worldview."[52]

The idea here that cultural change demands fresh questions to be asked of Scripture, yielding fresh answers for our contemporary culture, is based on the notion that what was an appropriate use of Scripture in the recent past is no longer an appropriate use of Scripture under postmodernism. The issue, then, is whether a church movement with an assumed ability to keenly read contemporary culture and submerges itself so deeply into that culture, can do so without risking compromise.[53]

Real counter-culture community
Christianity Today recently celebrated its 50th year anniversary, asking "how can followers of Christ be a counter-culture for the common good?" There are several differing perspectives on whether or not translating the gospel for culture is biblically balanced.[54]

One view calls us to *"Become all things to all people"* (1 Cor 9:22). Called an engagement and translation view, it echoes the classic "Christ transforming culture" of Richard Niebuhr and is generally embraced by the emergent movement and "seeker-sensitive" groups.

The second view calls us to *"Come out from them and be separate"* (2 Cor 6:17). Called a testimony and opposition view, its truth is reflected in the arguments of neo-Anabaptists Stanley

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[49] Heath White, *Postmodernism 101* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 123.

[50] Andy Crouch, "The Emerging Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 37.

[51] Millard Erickson, co-author in the "Book Report," *Crossway Publishers*, Spring 2005, Vol. 3, No. 1.

[52] www.faithworks.com

[53] Ibid., Carson, 43-44.

[54] Chris Armstrong, adapted from *Christian History* newsletter, October 25, 2005.

Hauerwas in his *Resident Aliens,* and Rodney Clapp in his *Peculiar People.* They assert the church has been ensnared and compromised by culture since Constantine. We are to challenge the powers of culture by being our own culture and living a distinctively separate life in following Jesus.

Augustine's contribution

A powerful contribution to this conundrum is Augustine's classic *City of God.* His treatment of the two human societies or "cites," The *City of God* and the *City of Man,* are symbolic of two peoples whose nature is determined by their love. At the same time, the two cities are also symbolic of their destinations: Jerusalem ("city of peace") and its peace vision, and Babylon ("babel") a state of confusion.

Augustine clearly perceived the peril of identifying the City of God too closely with any earthly culture. He warns that we must not equate any political entity—whether it be the Roman Empire, the American Republic, or any other—with the kingdom of God. "Resisting altogether any notion of earthly perfection, Augustine offers instead a complex moral map that creates space for loyalty and love and care, as well as for a chastened form of civic virtue."

Timothy George continues his comment that "The key word here, *chastened*, calls for a posture of engagement that acknowledges in the words of the old gospel hymn, 'this world is not my home; I'm just a-passin' through,' while *at the same time* working with all our might to love our neighbors as ourselves and to seek justice and peace as we carry out what Augustine calls 'our business within this common moral life'."[55]

Early Christianity and culture

One of the most startling accounts of early Christian effectiveness is reported by Rodney Stark in his book *The Rise of Christianity.*[56] He details how the early Christian movement grew from several thousand followers to some 30 million—about half the population of the Roman Empire—within just 300 years. Several massive epidemics took nearly a third of the Empire's population in the first centuries of the Christian era. Pagan elites and their priests fled the cities, leaving the church as the only functioning social network.

Christians provided basic nursing care not only for their own, but to non-Christians alike. "The church of the first centuries grew dramatically because Christians did what came naturally to followers of the crucified, resurrected Son of God . . . what changed pagan elites' minds was neither political overthrow nor artful persuasion. It was knowing followers of Christ personally and watching their response to disaster. *Cultural transformation resulted from the Christian community simply being itself*"[57] (emphasis mine).

Astoundingly, during this same period, all believers gathered in homes as the church; church buildings were built only after 300 AD. Reflecting on this impact of house churches, Stark concludes that "Christianity did not grow because of miracle working in the marketplaces (although there may have been much of that going on), or because Constantine said it should, or even because the martyrs gave it such credibility. It grew because Christians constituted an intense community . . . And the primary means of its growth was through the united and

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[55] Timothy George, "Love Amid the Brokenness," *Christian History*, Issue 94: February 2007, (quoting Jean Bethke Elshtain).

[56] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (NJ: Princeton Uni. Press, 1996).

[57] Andy Crouch, "It's Not About Power," *Christianity Today*, December, 2005

motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the 'good news'."[58]

Surely, when we renounce our true kingdom citizenship we side with the wrong kingdom. We struggle to make the gospel relevant to the world; but God is about the mission of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel. So, the question isn't simply "how can our missional church make the gospel relevant to cultures," but "how and where does our missional church fit into God's big story of his mission?" This is the real meaning of counter-cultural.

Coming to terms
Emergents will have to come to terms with the unchanging biblical paradigm of Christianity as a counter-cultural community in every culture and place. The 1974 Lusanne Congress on World Evangelization faced the culture conundrum with biblical balance: "The Gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture."

The Report concluded that the church must always and everywhere function like a dynamic equivalence [bible] translation "by using appropriate culture forms." On the one hand, they warned that "we deplore the pessimism which leads some Christians to disapprove of active cultural engagement in the world; and the defeatism which persuades others. . . . A naïve optimism is as foolish as dark pessimism."[59]

Historically, the "radical" Anabaptist reformers faced the problem head on by defining a biblical model of the church as a counter-cultural community. But this model was not their ideal. Rather, as John Stott avers, Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" raises dilemmas that can't be dodged for modern Christians. "Indeed, if the church realistically accepted his standards and values as here set forth, and lived by them, it would be the alternative society he always intended it to be, and would offer to the world an authentic Christian counter-culture."[60] Jesus laid down the essentials of his "radical" organic church as counter-cultural for whatever worldly environment it takes root. Christians must acknowledge that they are not called to affirm the culture as it is--but to be righteous "salt and light" in calling culture to repentance and transformation.

We must acknowledge, then, that America is rapidly becoming a postmodern place, and that the modern era is shifting or even passing away. And since modern churches are mostly built on modern assumptions with a modern history and a modern institutional culture, the implication is that they are destined for failure in the brave new postmodern world. Unless things change, we can expect some kind of disconnect between churches and the surrounding postmodern culture.

Although there are certain ideological conceptions within the postmodern mentality that need not be rejected, yet we must bear in mind that postmodernism is not the final form of culture and thought that will occur. We dare not tie ourselves too close to what is also to be a passing form. The terminology used may deceive us.[61]

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[58] Ibid., Stark, 208.

[59] John Stott & Robert Coote, eds., "The Willowbrook Report" in *Down To Earth, Studies in Christianity and Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 308-342.

[60] John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 10.

[61] Ibid., Erickson, *Christian Theology, 168-169.*

III- ITS THEOLOGICAL MENTALITY IS POST-DOCTRINAL
Three biblical fundamentals are in dire need of the reconciling balance of Scripture:

A— THE BIBLE AS METANARRATIVE

"A story… is the best way of talking about the way the world actually is. . . . The whole story of Christianity . . . is the story of the whole world. It is public truth."[62] As story, the effective way to overview Scripture is to comprehend it as a unified narrative-drama in six acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption initiated, Redemption accomplished, Spreading the good news, and Consummation.

In his comprehensive work *The Drama of Scripture: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, professor Kevin Vanhoozer clarifies that "biblical narrative contains both the recital of God's mighty acts, along with truth claim statements about God that are 'creedal' and 'propositional'." He reminds that the Christian Story is a divine metanarrative; not a human system. Contrastingly, postmodern philosophy does not come "from above," since human thought is located in a fallen human framework of limited knowledge "here below." Therefore, Christians are entitled to embrace the gospel "from above" as the ultimate interpretive framework wherein we can make sense of all other knowledge and experience.[63]

The character of biblical narrative

Narrative is the most common type of biblical literature, comprising over forty percent of the Old Testament. It amounts to three-quarters of the entire Bible. Old Testament narrative is about the unique way the OT people of God were inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell their story. "Unfortunately, failure to understand both the reason for and the character of Hebrew narrative has caused many Christians to read the Old Testament story very poorly. . . . People force incorrect interpretations and applications on narrative portions of the Bible as much or more than they do on any other parts."[64]

In fact, Old Testament narratives are not allegories filled with hidden meanings nor intended to teach moral lessons, and they do not necessarily teach directly, but usually illustrate what is taught explicitly elsewhere. Moreover, biblical narrative is told in three layers: First, the grand narrative of God's story encompassing the whole canon. Second, the Old Testament story of God's covenant people of Israel, including many small narratives of individuals that comprise it, and Third, the narrative of fulfillment in the new covenant people of Christ's church. Contemporary Christians need to be continually humbled by being reminded, "It is we Christians who have been graciously invited by God to join Israel's Story"[65] (cf. Romans 9-11).

But, wait a minute!

Postmoderns are passionate in talking about "story" which has rapidly become the category mostly used when pursuing an engagement with theology. In this often-overstated pursuit, Christianity begins to morph into a *philosophy of history* as a "Big Story" into which we put our little stories and our lives as individuals and communities.

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[62] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992). 38-41.

[63] Kevin Vanhoozer, in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, Myron Penner, ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 89.

[64] Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 89.

[65] Chris Hall, *Christianity Today*, September, 2006, 124.

But the fact is, *God is not a story,* nor can he be squeezed into its limited mold. Scripture doesn't tell us what it means, or why we should call Christianity "A Big Story." And what would be the point of calling "the faith once for all delivered to the saints "a big story?" (Jude 3).

Truth is, "The Christian Story" is presented as *kerygma* (gospel) and *didake* (doctrine/teaching), and it is offered as something to be believed and committed to. Jesus' teaching in the gospels and the apostles' proclamation in the Acts and the letters/epistles was repeatedly accompanied by an appeal to reason and evidence to support its claims. All this is data for theologians to sort into a coherent, unified, and plausible account of reality than just "a big story." Rather, "the goal of biblical *kerygma* is conviction that certain things are true—the production of a knowledge of the truth—and with that, salvation (see 2 Tim 2:24-26)."[66] The imperative here is to learn and embrace the critical difference between these two realities.

Strengths and weaknesses of narrative

One of the strengths of biblical narrative is its ability to provide the foundation for the unity of the Scriptures. The issue of unity vs. disunity between the two testaments will remain a basic issue in biblical studies. Nevertheless, in comprehending the one overarching story from creation to consummation, it configures people and events into a meaningful whole and supplies the grid for personal identity in asking, "What is my part in this story?"

On the other hand, the biblical metanarrative contains inherent weaknesses for interpreters. These include:[67]

(1) *The tendency to dehistoricize.* By denying real historical elements in the text, Scripture is cast adrift in a sea of relativity.

(2) *The denial of and setting aside the author's intended meaning.* In place of the original intent of the author behind the text-story, the reader's own interpretive response is inserted, resulting in every person's meaning. Radical relativism results and truth becomes impossible. Postmodernism denies the possibility to decide whether a given interpretation of a text is true or false, rendering the author's intent irrelevant.

(3) *The imposition of modern literary categories upon ancient genres—while ignoring the understanding of the early church.* The earliest NT exegetes, those closest to the actual events, didn't perceive the stories as purely literary creations. While there is nearly universal belief that the biblical stories are historical, the modern failure to consider each literary genre in light of its Jewish and Greco-Roman parallels for balance becomes a pitfall in interpretation.

(4) *The undermining of classic-traditional formulations of Christian doctrine sidesteps Scripture's intent* (A. McGrath).[68] The skeptic asks why believe this story? Stanley Hauerwas says the reason why Christians embrace it is "because it's the best damn story out there." I disagree. We embrace *this* story as the right one because it is the *only* substantially validated story existing, from the beginning of creation to its final climax in Jesus Christ. Consequently, the biblical metanarrative explains and judges every other story out there.

Biblical narrative as best understood, then, is the canonical story of our Triune God. The church catholic is the continuation of the story, as we reflect theologically on the story's plot. Our worship should enact God's narrative centering on the Word and Spirit as we gather

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[66] R. Douglas Geivett, in, *Christianity and The Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 160.

[67] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 164-168

[68] Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, & Justin Taylor, *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodations in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). The following data is from Crossway's Book Report, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring, 2005.

together with Jesus in participation of the Supper. Instead of narcissistic spirituality preoccupied with our own experiences, we must recover our stewardship of God's creation and rediscover the church's counter-cultural mission to God's world, wherein his story will be consummated.[69]

Myth and the biblical narrative

"Myth" is generally understood as a pagan category referring to stories and legends about the exploits of the gods. They are fictitious rather than historical, although many assumed them to be true. In contrast to the cleverly devised mythology of ancient and classical Greek tragedy, *mythos* may be understood to play a biblical role in the divine drama.

The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College recently sponsored the 5th Evangelism Roundtable on the theme "Imagination & the Gospel." The goal was to explore ways that allow imagination alongside academic thought and reason in proclaiming the continuous unfolding drama of redemption. It is in this context of preaching and storytelling that mythmaking becomes important. Several parts were delineated.

As to what God has done in history and in Christ, speakers suggested that imagination is vital to sharing the gospel in a postmodern secular culture. "The theodrama is the imaginative framework that lies at the heart of Scripture and thus ties everything together . . . the Bible's metaphors and narratives allow us to see the natural world as creation, and history as the theater of God's glory."

Moreover, culture and proclamation remind us that we have a part to play as we "creatively engage the culture around us to experience God."[70] C. S. Lewis believed that myths enable us to see, taste, feel or experience "in such a way that what gets conveyed is not simply a proposition, but something of the reality itself." Vanhoozer explains further that "instead of telling us what we are supposed to believe, literary forms [genres] like narrative and apocalyptic allow readers actually to view and experience the world in a certain way . . . *all* [genres] are necessary in order adequately to render the gospel. A Christian theology without apocalyptic, or prophecy, or wisdom, not to mention narrative, would be unthinkable . . . it is precisely the canonical forms that mediate to the reader the capacity to see, taste, and feel *biblically*." [71]

B—THE BIBLE AS DOCTRINE

If there is a most extraordinary misconception of scriptural knowledge, it is that of doctrine.

There has been a deterioration of the Christian mindset about biblical doctrine from the middle of the twentieth century until the present. Today, there is a popular near rejection of it. The "strange disappearance of doctrine in the church" phenomenon is symptomatic of a mental "blik." Coined in the dark "death of God" movement of the 1960's, the term suggests a kind of mental discernment situation—in this case an unbiblical, wrong one spiraling from nearly all quarters of evangelicalism, including renewalists.

Postmodernists vigorously oppose biblical doctrine as a remnant of outdated modernity. It follows that many emergent church leaders are conflicted over its place in God's kingdom, contending vacuously about it. Uncorrected, doctrinal delusion leads to extraordinary dissention in Christ's body, since it is a movement from Scripture-centeredness to self-centeredness.

Scot McKnight keenly observes that "the emerging movement has to deal with theological coherency. If there is anything ancient about the church, it is its theological articulation: creeds

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[69] Adapted from "The Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future," Northern Seminary, 2006, Robert Webber and Phil Kenyon.

[70] Laurie Fortunak, Billy Grahan Center *Centerline*, Spring, 2008; 1, 4.

[71] Ibid., Vanhoozer, 284-85.

didn't jump up from behind and hijack the church. . . . The emerging movement will eventually have to settle on some theological tenets—to declare its colors—what it believes about what Christians everywhere and always have believed."[72]

This dismissive attitude is blunt in McLaren's assertion that the Bible is comprised of "100 percent stories, poetry, personal letters, et cetera." He thinks most Christians entirely miss the purpose and message of the Bible, and that "people of postmodern bent find the Bible's doctrines and principles as interesting as grass clippings."[73]

Notwithstanding, the reason why suspicious minds see it this way is because they perceive doctrine as theoretically dry and mostly unrelated to life. But we have to ask why anyone claiming to be Christian loathes "God breathed" commands as cold and useless? In a stunning display of spiritual depth emotion, it took David the psalm-writer 176 verses to express his delight, love, and liberation about God's Word. In 22 stanzas of eight successive verses, his longest Psalm 119 is filled with eight synonyms for the Scripture. He is ecstatic as he exults in its many dimensions, including "law" (revelation/teaching), "precepts," "statutes," "commandments," and "ordinances" or "judgments."

The Word as dry grass clippings is a spiritualized *faux pas* of assumed dreariness. On the contrary, doctrine is truth elucidating and lived understanding. Keen spiritual minds like Dorothy Sayers' arrived at truth's realism when she avowed, on the contrary, *"It is the neglect of doctrine that makes for dullness."*

Christian theology and the progress of doctrine

Theology is the foundational essence of doctrine. The study of God (*theos* and *logos*) is "that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life. *Biblical Theology* takes as the primary source of its content the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament [as it] utilizes the tools and methods of biblical research. It also employs the insights of other areas of truth, which it regards as God's general revelation. *Systematic Theology* attempts to relate the various portions of the entire Bible to coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole.[74]

Biblical doctrine embodies four-dimensional functions[75]

It makes truth claims about the Triune God and his kingdom, and about what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

It frames experience by providing interpretive "road maps" in the divine drama.

It articulates and preserves the distinctive communal identity of the church as distinct from other communities.

It generates and then interprets the Christian metanarrative.

Teaching the whole purpose of God

But what is Christian doctrine and whence the confusion? Simply put, in the New Testament the Greek word for "doctrine" is *didaskalia,* meaning "teaching" or "that which is taught or written for instruction." It is a "teaching-instruction" given or handed over *(paradidomai)* by a Christian

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[72] Scot McKnight, "The Future or Fad? A Look at the Emerging Church Movement," *The Covenant Companion*, February, 2006, 10.

[73] Brian McLaren & Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 70-71.

[74] Ibid., Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 22-23.

[75] Ibid., Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, adapted from 94, 104.

teacher to disciple followers of Jesus. In the NT, therefore, teaching is both a body of doctrine as well as an active ministry by a teacher in verbally passing on the contents of this body of "teaching" to others.

One of the outstanding strengths of the house churches of the NT was in their strong affirmation and obedience in training others by personal discipling and teaching. When Paul gave his final words to the elders at Ephesus, he reminded them of all his faithful service in ministry with them and of the "all-embracing Christian instruction which he gave to his converts both publicly and in private homes."[76] He also insisted they remember that "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27). Such training includes the entire canon.

As the contemporary church continues to neglect or turn aside from the this foundational educational strategy—*a simple overview will attest to the fact that gifted teachers were highly affirmed and necessary for communicating doctrinal truth to God's people in the NT house churches as the following inductive data shows:*

Jesus the Master-Teacher
"The crowds were amazed at his teaching"
Jesus set the standard for teaching and interpretation of God's word. Called "Teacher" some forty times in the Gospels, his teaching was his primary action calling. Matthew is unique in showing the centrality of Jesus' five collections of teachings, each concluding with the formula: "When Jesus finished saying these things . . ." At the end of his first teaching discourse in "The Sermon on the Mount," it is noted that "The crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority (7:28-29). Moreover, Jesus made certain that "whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of God" (5:19b).

The majority opinion is that the shortest gospel Mark is the first and earliest, and was probably presented orally at a single time as "a piece of arresting storytelling."[77] Matthew made use of both Mark and Luke in creating his unique collection of five coherent teachings that may have been designed as a series of teaching episodes of the one gospel story, as in the manner of a modern television serial.

How exciting all this must have been in the very early Matthean house churches that Jesus began to establish (16:18-19; 18:20). His disciple-teachers instructed these new gatherings of believers about living out the promise, and that "whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven!" (5:19). When the end was nearing and Matthew finished his teaching, Jesus finalized his final commission to "Go and make disciples . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20).

Teaching in the Acts of the Apostles
The Acts begins emphasizing "all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (1:1) and ends focusing on the apostolic teaching of Paul in Rome "proclaiming the kingdom of God … and teaching about the Lord Jesus" (28:31). Both proclamation and teaching are paramount in the continuum of the Acts. The exemplar attitude of the Bereans stands out, because they were keenly receptive and received the message with great eagerness and critically examined the Scripture every day "to check up on Paul and Silas to see if they were really teaching the truth" (17:11 NLT). What an example of response to the word taught—and a critical model for Christian education!

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[76] F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of The Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 413-14.
[77] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 5.

The biblical data reveals that apostolic leaders at the first churches in Jerusalem were deeply involved in teaching the believers. There were teachers also at the other key church in Antioch when Barnabas and Saul first arrived (13:1). Paul not only taught the believers but also "proclaimed" *(kerygma)* the gospel to the pagans. Sometimes he "dialoged" *(dialegomai)* with pagans as on Mar's Hill in Athens (17:17), but also with believers in the gathered church at Troas (Acts 2:42; 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 2 Tim 4:17; Tit 1:3; Ac 11:26; 13:1; 20:7, 9). As to the completeness of teaching "the apostle's doctrine," Paul asserted, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27).

Spiritual gifts, Christian education, and learning

Paul's use of "teacher" and "teaching" was no doubt understood by his audience since they knew and understood his educational background. As a Jew and Pharisee, he modeled the scribe and rabbi. He was "advancing in Judaism beyond many" and "thoroughly trained in the law" under the great scholar Gamaliel (Gal 1:14; Ac 22:3). And as a product of the Diaspora he was well aware of the popular doctrines of pagan teachers.

It should be obvious, then, that although teaching is listed as a gift of the Spirit, it doesn't imply one might dispense with necessary preparation of knowledge gained by study and learning, and by sharpening the gifts given by the ascended Lord and the Holy Spirit. Robert Guelich rightly clarifies that the gift of teaching must be understood in its biblical and historical setting along with discernment. "Teaching involved preparation, a time of learning, studying, and above all, reflective thinking that integrated concepts and ideas with concern for life. In short, the teacher had inevitably 'gone to school'." But in today's dumbing down in churches it is patently true that "what passes for "teacher" and "teaching" [in many churches] is a poor copy of what was meant biblically by those same words . . . the gift of teaching may well be the most disregarded gift of them all." [78]

But dangers lurk here from lack of balance and abundance of spiritual pride For example, the believers at Corinth experienced enormous internal turmoil because of their self-perception of being *"pneumatikoi,"* or a false sense of spirituality, together with an over-emphasis on the rather spectacular gift of tongues based on Spirit inspiration.[79] Similarly today, imbalanced teachings of Pentecostal persuasion can influence over-reliance on the Holy Spirit as a subtle shift away from the essential foundational of sound Christian education for those in leadership at all levels of the local church. The apostolic letters to the NT churches should be a strong alert that the Lord of the church hasn't dispensed with the hard work of learned teaching as an essential norm.

James and his warning

Because of the critical role of teaching doctrine in the New Testament churches, James admonished that *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (3:1 TNIV).* How else could, and did, the early church movement become deeply foundationed in the textual canon and in powerful missional witness except for the critical teaching of Jesus, the apostles, and the host of other believers with the gift of teaching? The NT data is obviously grounded on an intelligent understanding of the spoken and written Word.

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[78] Robert Guelich, "And Some Teachers…" *Theology, News and Notes* of Fuller Theological Seminary, March, 1989, 5-7.

[79] Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 4-14.

Therefore, "sound doctrine" and "tradition" so centrally delineated throughout in New Testament cannot be understood "as anything other than conceptual and propositional in nature." Vanhoozer gathers the data by reminding that "Biblical doctrine proceeds from an authoritative script and gives direction for fitting participation of individuals and community in the drama of redemption. It is direction for performing the church's Scripture, aiming at the conceptual clarification of the gospel that is set forth in Scripture and confessed in the life and practices of the church. Embedded in the canon (the books of the Bible) are the patterns for correct speaking and thinking about God … that represent nothing less than 'sound doctrine' [or] authoritative teaching…. Doctrine is the canonical script that guides the church's performance of the way, the truth, and the life, and is the principal means God uses to build up the church…. *Doctrine is direction for rendering the kingdom of God and for putting on Christ.*"[80]

In our contemporary times, then, much of the exhortation in this section is becoming passé if not totally rejected in house church Christianity, along with denominational and postmodern expressions. Contrary to the emphatic teaching of the apostles, shallow notions of "teaching" are being propagated and encouraged by oxymoronic "non-leaders and non-teachers that will reflect the situation at Corinth, which was ultimately resolved by Paul's clear corrective teaching.

In contrast, one of the positive success stories of the emergent ministry of Rob Bell is centered on identifying numerous new leaders, and recruiting them to lead in their spawning new small groups and house churches. This model of the megachurch may be paving the way for the growth of and nexus with house church Christianity.

C- THE BIBLE IS BOTH PROPOSITIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL
The most obvious fact is that the biblical canon includes both narrative and propositional revelation.

Biblical propositions are more than mere proposals
What, then, is a proposition? A *proposition* is a logical statement set forth for demonstration or proof, usually expressed by a typical indicative or declarative sentence conveying a logical proposition. Ultimately, propositional truth is "cognitive information that demands personal commitment." On the other hand, a *proposal* is an offer presented as a recommendation for acceptance or rejection.

Do the Scriptures contain such propositional sentences? Of course. Professor Gordon Lewis clarifies: "The Bible features countless indicative sentences expressing explicit or implied propositions about what was, is or will be that can be affirmed or denied…. Biblical history is full of propositions about individual and communal responses to the messages of prophets, Christ, and apostles. They are informative about people's thoughts, intentions, feelings, words, acts, events, and dynamic relationships."[81]

The fact is that Paul's propositions have essentially created and defined traditional Christianity, hermeneutically understood as God's inspired Word and will for our lives. Furthermore, even a narrative is a spoken or written recital of connected events that have a particular kind of unity or coherence because of its plot. Consequently, "biblical narrative contains both the recital of God's mighty acts, along with truth claim statements about God that are 'creedal' and 'propositional'."[82]

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[80] *Ibid., Vanhoozer, The Postmodern Turn, 29, 78, 102-103.*

[81] Gordon R. Lewis, "Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, June 2003, 269-298.

[82] Ibid., Vanhoozer, 84-89.

Postmodernism is post-propositional
Postmoderns often deny the propositional value, sometimes even its presence, in the biblical text. Propositions get in the way of postmodern thinking because they say too much, with too much certainty in this age of uncertainty. Not liking parts of the Bible that scandalizes him, Brian MacLaren counsels us to "broaden our preoccupation with propositions, and drop any affair we have with certainty; and instead focus on the Big Story."[83] Worse, postmodern professor Carl Raschke is convinced that "The contention that the Bible is a supreme type of knowledge compares with the standpoint of the Gnostics. . . . Truth is the intimacy of the interpersonal—two persons define the sphere of truth. . . . Subjective truth has been far more congenial to the expansion of the gospel throughout the ages than any canon of propositional certitude." He concludes, "in the postmodern argot (vocabulary) we can say that Scripture is not a system of 'facts' but 'traces' of the divine fullness. Claims about biblical 'facts' are idolatrous claims…"[84] Of course this statement doesn't reflect biblical truth.

Language games & the postmodern linguistic turn
The most extraordinary human invention and pervasive influence on our minds is language.
But postmodernists presuppose that language stands between us and the "real" world, asserting that we cannot know language in itself or in essence, but only the different discrete and limited languages.

 The postmodern use of language is atypical and even bizarre in order to challenge their readers' way of thinking: if law can be unjust, so can grammar, since whoever controls the rules and usage of language controls what should be thought. Language becomes a conceptual scheme like a moving game of chess. It is a "language game" wherein relativism reigns and nothing is stable. Everything considered "fact" can be reinterpreted, and no assertion can be considered unassailable knowledge, since everything written is a matter of personal preference. Therefore, ordinary or traditional ways of talking become suspicious because they represent a form of power exercised by the past over the present.

 Language, therefore, *"situates us"* so that we are trapped inside our language and can't get out. And since we can't know an objective world, we make our own world by how we use our language. Naturally, then, postmodernism asserts that Christians make their own worlds by community language-use that gives understanding of faith. No one vocabulary is absolute or sufficient; all are contextual and contingent, leading to a human despair of a language. In the critical awareness of the human situation, then, we can only face the contingency and deconstructibility of any and every text, system of meaning, or "truth." *This may be postmodernism's greatest theoretical power and danger. It is the "linguistic turn."*

Biblical language, community, and divine communication
In contrast to the above, Scripture and Christian doctrine provide the most unique resources for language. "Language is part of God's design-plan for human beings … a God-ordained gift and invitation that enables us to relate in personal and cognitive ways to the world, to others, and to God."[85] Its essence is of Sovereign design. Christianity itself is the "Community of the Word." Just as there is only one baptism, one faith, and one body that the Lord prayed to be one in

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[83] Ibid., McLaren, *Adventures*, 78.
[84] Ibid., Raschke, 135.
[85] Ibid., Vanhoozer, 194.

unity, so the popular postmodern notion of every church community creating its own doctrine and language mitigates against the biblical prototype.

In fact, no Christian community never created divine revelation, but rather receives it as a written revelational text. It is God's revelation that, when comprehended and wholly embraced, creates the vital spiritual community. And the only revealed vocabulary is the canonical Scripture printed in any and every dialect. Believers are constituted by divine speech acts recorded in God's Word through Moses' pen, such as "you shall not murder" to Paul's letter "honor one another above yourselves."

The notion, then, that there can be a Christian language as such, and that Christian groups can and should create a community language is flawed and impossible. Which linguistic community has succeeded and so has become the relevant one? Communities are diverse, representing differing interpretive ways of believing and behaving. If languages are discrete and their use in the Christian communities makes their "Christian world," how many such worlds can be valid competitors? It is critical that we know these answers from those propagating the assertions.

The Bible is both informational and transformational

It has become popular among postmodern evangelicals to endorse the biblical revelation as "transformational" rather than informational. Consequently, priority is placed on experience rather than biblical teaching. For the most part the emergent move is away from a Reformed informational-creedal understanding of Scripture to a postconservative and Pietistic transforming experience as primary, with Scripture's doctrinal teaching secondary. Postconservative Roger Olson is overtly bold about this, claiming that "Doctrine comes into play along with experience, but doctrine serves experience and not vice versa. One is the master and the other is the servant. . . . Postconservatives regard all doctrines and theological systems as 'man-made' rather than 'God-made.' God sends a story that includes some propositions that help us interpret it. Theology is our attempt to interpret it further and create doctrines that do justice to it. *But doctrines are our products; they are not divinely communicated.*"[86]

Olson is on theological thin ice in his claim that biblical doctrinal teachings are "man-made" and not "God-made." Does this imply that most of Paul's letters to the house churches consist of "man-made" stuff unworthy of the assertion of being "God breathed." By all means, Scripture is *transformational in experience just as it is informational in its doctrinal teachings.* It is not either/or but always both/and. But the Bible can be a both/and balance only when it is not subjected to the postmodern vise that holds human experience as ultimate knowledge. God's written word with its many intellectual doctrinal statements in propositional form will remain primary, so that in the divine communication of his will and plan we can experientially live the Spirit-filled life as it is carefully detailed in the biblical data.

On knowledge and truth knowing, Paul asks "how can they hear without someone proclaiming it to them? Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom 10: 8, 14, 17). He ties the written truth with being saved: "They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved . . . and so all will be condemned who have not believed the truth . . . God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel" (2 Thess 2:10-14). Jesus reminded, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures" (Mt 22:29). And Luke reminds "I wrote an orderly account for you . . . so that you

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[86] Ibid., Olson, 78-79, 88.

may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lu 1:3-4). And John tells it as it is, "I write these things . . . so that you may know that you have eternal life.

An unexpected conclusion?
In the drama of Scripture, then, there is direct, historical, and propositional revelation all received as divinely inspired "teaching" that is properly called "doctrine." Professor of New Testament and author of *The Heremeneutical Spiral,* Grant Osborne is keen to remind that since the central speech-act in Scripture is assertion, then "belief in the Bible demands that Scripture makes assertions and that they are true . . . *Without propositional content [the Bible] would be without meaning or faith content.*"[87] Common knowledge recognizes the presence of indicative and imperative sentences everywhere in the biblical text, so we have to grapple with the didactic and propositional content throughout the canon, everywhere facing theological truths that demand commitment and action, including the historical narrative portions.

   I believe the only sane conclusion about propositional revelation and its denial by postmodern and some emergent Christians should be understood as truth denying and false, revealing a sub-Christian frivolous view of biblical revelational authority. The movement reflects a "feeling is believing" kind of creed, in place of the time-tested and consensus tradition of historic Christianity established by Jesus and the apostles. And it contradicts the clear and written textual evidence all the way from Moses, David, and the prophets. Both Jesus and Paul talk about forfeiting redemption by resistance to the truth, while obedience to the truth brings fullness in Christ and sets us free. Paul even makes the bold alert about a time "when people will not put up with sound doctrine . . . but will say what their hearers' itching ears want to hear."

   The evidence, then, underlines that contemporary postmodern evangelicals couldn't begin to truck with first century Paul and his real Christianity. For example, in his short second chapter to Titus he penned only fifteen verses, but in ten of them he exhorted about "teaching" the various groups of believers in the churches of Crete. To postmodern Christianity, that would be considered far too much non-essential in-your-face exhortation for church life today.

The nuisance of nomenclature
There seems to be no end of new terminologies that attempt to define evangelicals. But are all these nomenclature a sign of spiritual health, or our selfish idiosyncrasies? Since Christ's church is supposed to *be what it is*, a unified living organism, why then our multitudinous labels? After all, Christ's prayer concern remains: "Holy Father, I am praying for those you have given me . . . *so that they may be one as we are one.*"

   Even the characterization of evangelicals as "conservative" and "postconservative" is insufficient. It does not fully encompass their realities seeking definition, for various reasons. For example, many "Conservative Evangelicals" as negatively described by Roger Olson are really more correctly "Fundamentalist Evangelicals," the fitting terminology used for early stalwarts in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy at the turn of the twentieth century, "Fundamentalist" can still be a reflection of old traditions that create a negative gospel and reflect an amalgamation with a political "right wing" orientated toward selective politics perceived to be biblical issues. They are among numerous television evangelists and/or mega church pastors who proclaim a diluted gospel of health-wealth prosperity, name-it-and-claim-it faith, or even some of the massive para-church organizations with a lop-sided message.

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[87] Ibid., Osborne, 408-410.

Other scholarly inclined evangelicals and professionally situated in college and seminary teaching and may also be members of the Evangelical Theological Society, do not identify with "fundamentalism" nor are fully at home with the "conservative" label. Sadly, a Christianized fundamentalism can also be reflected in the skewed "conservative" politics that are not altogether unlike the fundamentalism in some of the world's radical and violent movements.

I submit that a more comprehensive and accurate terminology is "Mainstream Evangelicals." There always exists a "mainstream" in evangelicalism, connoting a middle of the stream current that is the prevailing thought and action. It is similar to "mainline" as a symbolic road or course that presents a prominent position of balanced status while evading the ditches on either side.

New movements—new labels

On the other hand, concise movements of Spirit renewal sometimes necessitate descriptive nomenclature. A current label of a possible new generation is "Progressive Evangelicals" arising mainly out of the effective spiritual-political ministries of Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*. But some might also refer to this as "liberal" Evangelicals.

And since the key words "justice" and "righteousness" are used interchangeably in the biblical text, this vibrant advance of social justice proclaims both a recollection and a response to God's covenantal character as reflected in texts like Micah 6:8, *"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."* Wallis asserts that "the religious right is being replaced by Jesus, and the revolutionaries are really digging into Jesus, and what they read in the book of Acts doesn't correspond to their churches. And so they're changing them or going out and creating new communities."[88] Support for this claim may be reflected in Wallis "Social Justice" renewal gatherings as overflowing crowds respond in public decisions of commitment to ministry to the poor and needy in their city.

The new revolutionaries

Timothy Kelly[89] asserts that America is beginning to witness a backlash against the politics of polarization, coupled with a yearning for centrism. "Principled Centrism" draws on the best ideas from the entire political spectrum, and advances policy positions that fit within the framework of core principles and values. Kelly clarifies the basic principle—that it is possible to hold core principles and values (many rooted in Judaic-Christian ethics) and engage the issues of the day from the center. Principled centrism may thus be seen as a "third way" of moderation and civility, since it attempts to avoid the errors of both the far left and the far right. Moreover, centrism embraces the "abandoned middle" that is often deserted because we tend toward one extreme or the other, losing the coveted center necessary for intelligent learning and finding balanced truth.

A similar label is David Gushee's "The Evangelical Center." Mainline or Centrist Evangelicals hold to the highest view of Scriptures' authority, but do not belabor issues of minor importance as fundamentalists and some conservatives do. They do not usually split hairs over eschatological minutia, and are not exercised over issues considered things indifferent, or *"adiaphora."*

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88 Zach Exley, "Preaching Revolution," *In These Times*, March 2007, 23.

89 Timothy A. Kelly, "How to Engage Politics Without Taking Sides: The Case for Principled Centrism," *Theology, News & Notes*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Spring, 2008, 6-8, 23.

An evangelical continuum
On a continuum from left to right, evangelical options may currently look like this—however, since the categories are not unbending, some may overlap

Fundamentalist	Conservative	Mainline Progressive Centrist Liberal	Postconservative Emergent Revolutional Classic Liberalism
EVANGELICAL			NEO-EVANGELICAL/POSTMODERN

IV- ITS HISTORICAL COMMISSION IS POST-REFORMATIONAL
"Most folk know about Luther, Calvin and the Reformation. Some have likened what is taking place in the church today to a 'second reformation,' because the church is organic (the living body of Christ) it needs evolution or re-formation to stay healthy and vibrant"[90]

The source above suggests that the shift to postmodernism can be described as "The Great Disruption." Numerous books have been published calling the church back to its historical roots in the sixteenth-century reformation. But leaders of the emergent movement believe we're entering a period of theological transition that may be as significant as the Reformation itself. One believes "the first reformation was about freeing the church; while the new reformation is about freeing God's people from the church."[91] Another is bolder still. In *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity,* Carl Raschke avers that "the Next Reformation" is a postmodern reformation in this revolutionary moment in history, with an accompanying "end of theology."[92] But when we ponder how far removed from a balanced biblical base these assertions are, we have to wonder how reformational renewal can be found within spiritual defection and backsliding. Are these radical views of the emergent movement actually a "new reformation?" Hardly.

The institutional church and the mess we're in
 As a renewalist I concur that many of the emergent movement's negative perceptions of denominational and independent churches are valid and needed. Some of their critiques of mainline denominationalism's failure reflect the institutional fruit of the sixteenth century Reformation.
    Church history witnesses to the statistics of division, deterioration, and decline among the more than 2,000 denominations in America (more than 30,000 denominations worldwide and counting). Sometimes these backslidings are from doctrinal vapidity and amending due to modern cultural inroads, sometimes by loss of vision and ignorance established by the founders of the movement, and at other times by changes of environment and membership.

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[90] www.emergingchurch.org.
[91] John White, www.dawnministries.org, "six tough questions for the church," item no. 3
[92] Ibid., Raschke, 8-9.

Even within the stalwart Presbyterian Church USA, the average age of members a few years ago was 62. Many are leaving the denomination from divisions over liberalism and homosexual leadership. In 2003, the Episcopal Church USA lost 100 members per day. Defections are occurring in the American Baptist Church, the United Church of Christ, and many others.

The postmodern emergent church movement rightly perceives that communicating the gospel within denominational boundaries has often been ineffective. They point out that 75% of American churches have plateaued/declined, while 24% are growing (mostly by migrant movers), while only 1% growth is by reaching non-Christians. They point to the massive malcontent in historic Christendom as directly related to their forms and structures, and things that are dying. Aged and sometimes deteriorating cathedral structures no longer excite and satisfy, but rather reflect a mood of old-fashioned-ness and unchanging-ness. The liturgies led by professional ministers have often become repetitive and meaningless to congregants, and seldom are participatory by those considered "laity." Oftentimes the liturgies reflect a "dead orthodoxy" in which the church has become deathly "institutionalized" and morbidly predicable. Moreover, some statistics report that as many as 1500 pastors drop out every month while in the same time nearly the same number are forced to resign. The situation is bleak.

In a very real sense, then, the realities codified in *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices,* echo a call for genuine reformation. But defining such reformation is not an easy task within the current confusion that has arisen in evangelical Christianity and its postmodern counterpart.

Summarizing the whole thing

When the dust settles on the issue of comparing the emergent movement with the sixteenth century Reformation, the critical fact remains: The evangelical Reformation was about the revelation and authority of Scripture, the sufficiency of Christ's atonement, salvation by grace through faith alone, and unbiblical notions of indulgences and liturgical practices. On the other hand, the emergent movement's "new reformation" is about major changes occurring in a postmodern culture and how we respond. It is mostly a cultural versus Scripture issue.

Moreover, for the most part, postmodernism doesn't teach us things we don't already know; but rather reminds us how evangelicals have failed in some profound ways. In this sense, it is post-reformational. The changes postmodernity propagate may best be termed "ultramodern," since different ideologies coexist in time. In the late twentieth century, there were premodernists (trusting in authority inherited from Medieval times); modernists (trusting in human reason); and postmodernists (who distrust authority and lost trust in reason, but have found nothing to replace it). This is the crux of postmodern thought.[93]

V- ITS POST-MODERN PROCESS MAY INDUCE POST-POSTMODERNITY
"A renewed Christian advance may inspire a move beyond postmodernity."

The word "emerging" raises further questions. Since we're talking about a *kind* of church, where was that church and what was it doing before recently beginning to emerge? And what is it emerging from? Whatever the answers, the word remains a misnomer. Clearly, the church Christ founded is not an institution, but a living organism. And every local church is emerging if it is still alive, and growing up in Christ as it inches toward the final eschatological kingdom. How

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[93] Ibid., White, *Postmodernism 101,* 41

then can one group of churches proclaim they're emerging in contrast to others? In a very real sense, the contemporary "emergent church" has already emerged. It is here among us; but what essentially is it and where it is going has not at all been answered.

The postmodern creed is predominately negative and arrives late on the scene
Postmodernity has not discovered anything that was not beyond what Christian Scripture and tradition anticipates (at least implicitly), and thus claims to know more than it actually can.[94] The postmodern observation that human reason is "situated" is not new to Scripture's doctrine of creation and the Fall, portraying humankind as finitely rooted in the dust of the earth while at the same time only "a little lower than the heavenly beings."

As for postmodern ideology and theology criticism, we well know that the will to power distorts knowledge claims and the quest for truth because we have not only the original narrative of the Fall, but with it the doctrine of original sin. Moreover, we have the Hebrew prophets' idolatry critique that antedates postmodernity by millennia. And as to the postmodern "discovery" of the inadequacy of human language for understanding or naming God, Christian theology acknowledges the same reality, while affirming God's revelatory "God breathed" canon. Beyond that, the story of Babel represents a standing critique of any one human vocabulary that assumes to be the "language of heaven."[95]

What's more, postmodernism simply has no room for the slightest possibility that the real God of eternity may have actually showed up in real history in the real incarnate Christ. Vanhoozer succinctly observes that from a Christian perspective, "we must conclude that postmodernity is ultimately the story of *pilgrim's digress* . . . the postmodern pilgrim resembles a vagrant—his way leads nowhere in particular. Indeed, it is not even clear that postmodern pilgrims have even embarked on the journey. *Perhaps they're waiting for Godot.*"[96]

Post-postmodernism may already be on the scene
While some assume the final period of church history and ideology has arrived, we must realize that postmodernism is also an historical phenomenon conditioned by its situation in time and culture. Postmodernism may have a much shorter life span than modernism had—since contradictory elements within make it inherently unstable—and it may therefore fade more rapidly. Since most historical ideologies have eventually been displaced, it should not be surprising if this one will also. Once a church's essence has become "postmodern," it may be crippled from lack of healthy organic maturation and hopelessly dated in its bonds within a contemporary and eventually passing culture, just as was the case in most churches institutionally established as "liberal" in the modern era.

Erickson notes that "there are some early signs of the rise of post-postmodernism," and concludes that since the emergent church is avowedly part of the postmodern mood and philosophy—a worldview in dire necessity of spiritual and intellectual change—a Christian advance would be to move beyond to pursue and propagate post-postmodernism.[97]

But as it goes in times of open season on creating new theologies—even this is already problematic because another writer has also proposed the idea of post-postmodernism, *but with*

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[94] Ibid, Vanhoozer, *The Postmodern Turn*, 84-86.
[95] Ibid., 83-84
[96] Ibid., Vanhoozer, 96.
[97] Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (InterVarsity, 2001), 319-320.

an astounding twist. Robert Greer[98] believes the Holy Spirit may teach multiple paradigms arising from the Christ event. In this author's idea of post-postmodernism, then, diverse ways of proclaiming truth in all the differing religious traditions may be right (i.e., both liberalists and conservatives, Calvinists and Arminians, and all other differing perspectives are right and are teaching the truth). *The author's astounding notion is based on the fallacious idea that all are right because the Spirit has given the freedom to shape truth differently without violating the essential integrity of Scripture!*

Postmodernity, then, is not "from above"

"The peril of postmodernity is that of losing the capacity to be informed and transformed by God's Word."[99] In this precarious sense postmodernity is "post-Christian." In Chapter One I reflected on how Schleiemacher's notion of salvation via a "theology of experience" was structured "from below," turning on its head the "from above" biblical and reformational doctrine of "salvation by grace through faith" into anthropologically situated "salvation by faith through grace." Schleiermacher's success was dramatic in realigning huge segments of Christianity on anthropological and sociological foundations.

But by embracing postmodernity on an anthropological cultural reality, which direction is the emergent church actually going? Many leaders have been calling the church back to the Reformational Christianity of sixteenth-century Luther and Calvin, to its vast dynamic theology and denominational ecclesiologies. But Protestantism alone cannot provide an effective renewal model. Paleo-orthodoxy proponents and some emergent types claim to be calling us back to the so-called church fathers for their patristic "traditional" or ancient "paleo-orthodoxy of the second to fourth centuries, with an early church establishment of institutional and hierarchal Christianity and its defamatory patriarchal teachings.

While those searching for deeper connections to the New Testament church can find valid spiritual light everywhere and anywhere along the way, vintage Christianity with an amalgamation of ancient liturgies, objects, and environmental symbols falters somewhere short of the original paradigm of New Testament house church ecclesiology.

The non-emergent prototype

In the search for original and authentic Christianity, I propose we go all the way back to the beginning to learn anew the non-emergent body of data codified in our New Testament documents as "the teaching of Jesus and the apostles' doctrine."

The fact is, "church history does not support a picture of theologians who constantly created new doctrines. Rather, it demonstrates that Christian leaders addressed new situations by applying Scripture truths to them . . . It presupposes that all theological systems have their basis not only in Scripture but in the past and seeks to unlock the historical basics behind them."[100]

If the thesis that the New Testament household churches embody the only and final prototype revealed to us is in fact true, (*"You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it"*), how much more effective would today's worldwide membership of that body be if all believers would seriously consider original household Christianity as the most essential renewal option.

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[98] Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 201.

[99] Ibid. 78.

[100] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 292.

Surely, it would be vastly better than the 30,000 humanly devised church brands that we call denominations.

Moreover, rather than continuing to re-write new theologies for contemporary emergent ("emergency") situations (ala Tickle in *The Great Emergence*), how much more sane to pay attention to the systematic theology of the New Testament "early church" created by Jesus and the apostles.

Author and renewalist Howard Snyder has perceptively summarized the various characteristics and correctives of the house church:

> The New Testament teaches us that the church is a community in which all are gifted and all have ministry. The church as taught in Scripture is a new social reality that models and incarnates the respect and concern for people that we see in Jesus himself. This is our high calling. And yet the church, in fact, often betrays this calling. House churches are a big part of the way out of this betrayal and this paradox. Face-to-face community breeds mutual respect, mutual responsibility, mutual submission, and mutual ministry. The sociology of the house church fosters a sense of equality and mutual worth, though it doesn't guarantee it as the Corinthian church shows. The New Testament principles of the priesthood of believers, the gifts of the Spirit, and mutual ministry are found most naturally in this informal context.
>
> House churches are revolutionary because they incarnate this radical teaching that all are gifted and all are ministers. They offer some hope for healing the body of Christ from some of its worst heresies: that some believers are more valuable than others, that only some Christians are ministers, and that the gifts of the Spirit are no longer to function in our age. These heresies cannot be healed in theory or in theology only. They must be healed in practice and relationship in the social form of the church.[101]

All kinds of possibilities present themselves. If we want a true reformation, what is more authentic than the one body of Christ reforming itself into worldwide household communities? Is it conceivable that the vast Christian groupings could begin to develop toward geographically situated house churched clusters? Struggling denominational groups may consider uniting together while retaining their heritage. Larger denominations already dividing may reunite more authentically around apostolic teaching communities. Megachurches may continue to experience renewal by breaking into smaller units. Could the growing divide between the global South and the global North be diminished within Howard Snyder's summary? Perhaps renewalists and missional leaders may want to gather to consider if there is sufficient merit in such ideals.

Finis
"When the *foundations* are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord is in his holy temple—the Lord is on his heavenly throne." (Ps 11:3-4) "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also *members of his household*, built on the *foundation* of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:19-20). This is our assurance and our assets.

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[101]Howard A. Snyder, "Why House Churches Today?" lecture at Fuller Seminary, 1996, cited by Frank Viola in *Reimagining Church*, 2008, 314.

David's attitude should be ours when dark and dangerous ideologies threaten our faith foundations and the well being of God's people. The vision of the enthroned Lord and his vigilant holiness is the great stabilizing factor in answer to David's question, and to ours. Summarily, "The way forward for Christians is to proceed with caution, but proceed we must. We are, right now, culturally and philosophically, situated in the throes of postmodernity. What it will be, or what we will be, we do not yet know; *but responsible and thoughtful Christians must come to terms with and work through the postmodern turn and its implications for faith, not ignore or retreat from it.*"[102]

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[102] Ibid., Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 30.