
Title: The Emerging Church: What They are Saying

Text: Acts 17:16-34

Speaker: Chad Richard Bresson

Introduction What is it like to nail jello to a wall? I feel as though that is the task I have been given this evening. How do you define something that insists it cannot be defined? How do you define something that will redefine itself the moment someone attempts to define it? How do you define something knowing the whole time an attempt at a definition plays right into the critique and proves its point? After all isn't this postmodernism, in that, the moment I attempt to define something is the moment that the postmodern recipient of the critique labels me "modern"?

That is the kind of a world we live in at the present. And it is an evangelicalism for which we must have an answer. A recurring theme of the Apostle Paul is that the best defense against error is to continue to preach and teach sound doctrine. The phenomenon of which we speak is, in the words of Paul, ruining its hearers (2 Tim. 2:14ff). The faith of many is being upset by those who are, both intentionally and unintentionally, swerving away from the truth (2 Tim. 2:18). It is into this kind of undefinable morass that we must speak truth for the salvation of our and their souls. Regardless of the fact that I stand here this evening knowing full well that those who will critique this are going to label me as "modern" and as "unloving", we must and we will speak the truth; those labels are already irrelevant. And to be honest, the Bible "labels"; the Bible "categorizes"... labeling and categorization are not modern inventions. Categories began in the garden when Adam named the animals, and in the wake of the fall when God categorized the "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the serpent". And I suppose if there are any presumptions or presuppositions that will undergird what we say tonight it is just that: God has spoken... outside of ourselves and outside of and into this situation... and regardless of what we think or what we might say, we must align ourselves with what God has said.

There are a few things I must say at the outset.

The first is this: I know full well the life context in which I find myself. This for me is personally intense and intensely personal. I have friends both near and far who are caught up in this. I work at an institution that has been embroiled in controversy over this topic. In the past two years, the predominance of the questions put to me concern the emerging and emergent church. Quite frankly, this is an issue I wish would go away. And it doesn't. I also realize that some of what I will say will not be popular in some quarters; that prospect does not excite me. But as an undershepherd who answers to the Overshepherd, I am called to speak the truth in love for the benefit of my flock and this church.

The second is this: If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck, it's not a hippopotamus. I've heard ad infinitum that the emerging church can't be defined. Many who are in this movement refuse to be called emerging or emergent; and why not? Postmoderns don't like labels. They don't like definitions. If I am going to label something as emerging due to a common set of characteristics and beliefs, that "something" will recoil precisely because it is "emerging". In fact, the emerging church movement up until just a couple of years ago recoiled... it did not want to be called a movement, in spite of the fact that it was. Why? Because calling it a "movement" is something that "moderns" do. And, despite the fact that it's possible to identify a common set of core values and beliefs held by many who choose to hang out together, write books together, engage in conferences together, many times under the "emergent" and "emerg-

ing” banners, those who protest labels highly protest when we choose to give them that label regardless of their protest. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck, it’s not a hippopotamus.

The third is this: 100% of the names we critique tonight are going to say that I took them out of context. Russ said it last week. These people pride themselves in being a moving target. And they expect that because they are a moving target and because words mean different things to different people that we, then, should refrain from attempting to “paint them into a corner”. To do so is “sooooo modern”. Tonight represents an honest attempt to portray what they believe through what they say with the intended meaning of the context in which it was written or spoken. But the fact that tomorrow they will deny they meant what was said here doesn’t preclude us from telling the truth about what they are saying.

The fourth is this: there are those so-called conservatives who want to be able to have their postmodern culture, postmodern theology, and postmodern worldview and still say, “that’s not me.” The claim is made that the emerging church is so big and not monolithic that to critique some who are emerging is to paint with too broad a brush. The apparent motivation behind such statements is usually to squelch the critique by always finding ways of being beyond or outside of the critique. They will find ways to say “that’s not me”, even when everything in the theology of the duck points to the duck being a duck. They can say what they want about what they believe, but we have a counseling center kept quite busy by those who are being “ruined” by what they hear and whose lives are “upset” (2 Tim. 2:14ff). I’m going to say right at the outset that the brush is broad and the brush is accurate.

And that leads to the fifth point that needs to be made up front: Brian McLaren is the heart and soul of the entire emerging movement. It is popular among some so-called conservatives who are part of the emerging church movement to say things like “Brian McLaren is to the left of the emerging church” or “Brian McLaren represents only one segment of the emerging church”, or “Brian McLaren is only on the fringe of the Emerging Church Movement”. There is a certain amount of naivety in that kind of sentiment and a serious lack of discernment (and that naivety and lack of discernment tends to be a prominent characteristic of those who think they can keep the good parts of the emerging church and jettison the bad ones).

I did my own very unscientific case study about the “fringeness” of Brian McLaren by passing these comments by one prominent leader of the emerging church (a conservative no less), and a prominent theologian. The emerging leader scoffed at such a thought, heaping scorn and ridicule on those who would suggest that Brian McLaren is somehow a fringe element in the emerging church. The theologian said McLaren and some of those around him like Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, not only are not fringe, they are the core of the emerging church movement. At the end of the day, McLaren, Pagitt, Jones, Shane Claiborne, and Rob Bell are THE duck (Claiborne and Bell are among those who do not want to be labeled emerging, even though everything around and about them suggests otherwise).

Many of those who don’t desire to be lumped in with McLaren & others will attempt to distance themselves from some of the heretical things coming out of the emergent camp (and good for them). But they still share the same kinds of critique of the institutional church, the same kind of postmodern epistemology (worldviews) including the entertainment of the idea that doubt is normal, the same methods of doing church, the same affection for Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul, the same overindulgence of social concerns (what some have rightly dubbed the “sa-

cramentalization of the poor”), and the list goes on. And more often than not, those who chafe at using McLaren as an example of the emerging church are themselves unwilling to place McLaren and these others outside of the gospel. It never ceases to amaze me that there are plenty who would protest “don’t lump me in with Brian McLaren”, but then continue to quote him affectionately and balk at condemning his theology as anti-gospel. They still consider him one of us.

When all is said and done, those who share some of the same kinds of postmodern worldview traits... seeing the world as McLaren does... protest what they consider to be “guilt by association”. And we must be as clear as the Bible is clear on this: a man is known by the company he keeps. In the last couple of months and especially in preparing for tonight’s sermon, in all of the reading I have done and all the interviews that I have conducted, I am convinced more than ever that McLaren is not fringe. And neither are the others I have already mentioned. There is so much crosspollenization between all of these leaders and the ideas coming from the emerging church. While they represent the worst of the emerging church, they are inseparable from and at the center of it. So, tonight, as we hear the emerging church speaking through their words, we will be observing some of what Brian McLaren is saying precisely because he is representative of the emerging church in many areas of his ideology.

This does not mean that there is not some kind of continuum between sound doctrine, orthodoxy, error and heresy (and the moment I use the word “continuum” is the moment I will be labeled mean-spirited and “modern”; “how dare you put me on a continuum” – even so-called conservatives will say that – “you can’t put me in a box”). Some are worse than others. Others have not denied the gospel (and good for them). But I will say this: very little of it (its ideology, methodology, epistemology, and theology), including that which is supposedly conservative and has not denied the gospel, is sound doctrine. It is this way because spanning the entire emerging church movement are shared assumptions about our culture, the church, salvation, church history, ecclesiology, epistemology, and their doctrine of man. All of these things intersect with “sound doctrine” (2 Tim. 2:14ff). When “sound doctrine” is compromised, it has an effect on the hearers... lives are ruined and upset or turn upside down.

And in that sense, much of our critique against those who would be in the so-called conservative element of the emerging church would also be a valid critique against most Arminian, seeker friendly, and church growth churches. We are Reformed and unashamedly so... that will color every critique we have against those methodologies and theologies that are popular in our American Christianity. Most of evangelicalism is not reformed. But... even though there is a continuum, there are some fundamental and shared values that almost all in the emerging church have in common. And we will still make the critique.

Having said all of that... the purpose of our time together this evening is to look at what the emerging church is actually saying. Too often, it is easy to critique something that is new and shoot from the hip without bothering to hear what they are saying. Just because it sounds different does not mean that it isn't right. It's possible that those who are dissatisfied with the status quo in American evangelicalism have some legitimate gripes. It would be quite easy, as you'll see over the course of this sermon, to pick at those things that don't quite add up to what we consider to be sound doctrine. But I don't believe that kind of critique is helpful until we first listen to some of what they are saying needs addressed in our culture.

We are going to begin this evening in Acts chapter 17. One doesn't have to read any emergent's material very long or listen to them talk and it becomes quite apparent that a pet passage in scrip-

ture for the emerging church is Acts 17:16-34. It forms the basis for a biblical apologetic as to why they are so concerned about culture. This is what God's word says...Acts 17:16-34.

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. ²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for " 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, " 'For we are indeed his offspring.' ²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." ³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

So this is an example of Paul preaching virtually the same gospel to the Gentiles as he preached to the Jews in the synagogues, right? Wrong. Apparently.

"At one point [Paul is] talking about how God made us all, and he says to them, 'As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' He quotes their own poets. And their poets don't even believe in the God he's talking about. They were talking about some other god and how we are all the offspring of that god, and Paul takes their statement and makes it about his God. Amazing. Paul doesn't just affirm the truth here; he claims it for himself. He doesn't care who said it or who they were even saying it about. What they said was true, and so he claims it as his own. This affirming and claiming of truth wherever you find it is all through the writings of Paul" – Rob Bell, "Velvet Elvis", p. 79

Bell suggests that Paul is affirming that what the Greeks believed was “truth”. But the reality is that it was perverse. It is an awfully big assumption to suggest that because Paul quotes it, Paul is affirming its veracity. And yet this is how the emerging church understands the relationship between the church and culture. The emerging church has an overly broad understanding of “common grace.” One of the mantras of our evangelicalism is “all truth is God’s truth”. Now, on the one hand, that statement is valid. But the question becomes just what is being defined as “truth”. And the question here is whether or not the Greeks in fact had the truth. Common grace, or the unbeliever’s grasp of truth, is much smaller than what the emerging church is telling us. But this passage is used to support all sorts of unbiblical notions of the relationship between church and culture and that those “notions” are at the heart of what has been called “the emerging church”.

What is the emerging church?

So, for the next few minutes, I’m going to give some quotes from the emerging church so that they are speaking in their words; and as much as is possible, I am presenting these quotes in their context so that their words speak for themselves. And these quotes are interspersed with comments about how we at Clearcreek Chapel understand these words in the light of the scripture.

What becomes apparent from the following self-definitions is that those in the movement believe that 1. the church as an organism arises from within the culture, rather than being given life from outside of the culture and placed into and over against the culture, 2. a task of the church is to relate to the culture, 3. the kingdom of God and the church are not the same, 4. there’s no connection between the gospel and ecclesiology, 5. deconstructing not only methods but forms of church is a primary mission, 6. the church exists to transform culture, and 7. the church can pick and choose the good from the bad in postmodern epistemology and/or ideology. The third point cannot be overstated. A predominant theme in the writing and speaking of the emerging church is kingdom, and the emerging church’s understanding of kingdom is pitted against the church as if the kingdom and the church are not the same. The last point is a shared (yet erroneous) assumption with other movements such as the church growth movement and theonomy.

“Emerging churches are missional communities arising **from within postmodern culture** and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time.” – Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p. 28

“(The emerging church movement) is part of a larger process of **dismantling ideas of church that simply are not viable** in postmodern culture. **Neither the gospel nor the culture demands these expressions of the faith. Emerging churches remove modern practices of Christianity, not the faith itself.**” – Gibbs and Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, pp. 28-29

“(The emerging church)...is **new forms of church** that relate to the emerging culture.” – Jonny Baker, (Grace, London) in Gibbs and Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p. 41

“(The emerging church is)...seeing the church as **not necessarily the center of God’s intentions**. God is working in the world, and **the church has the option to join God or not...(focusing) more on the kingdom than the church...**” – Doug Pagitt, (Solomon’s Porch, Minneapolis), in Gibbs and Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p.42

“The church universal is an emerging church... **it is a church always in the process of becoming.** It has never arrived in any final way... it ‘emerges’ as it engages the complex mosaic of cultures represented by the peoples of the earth. In so doing, **it is morphed in those cultures and exerts a redemptive influence within them.**” – Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p. 43

The following quote is considered by many to be one of the more comprehensive definitions of the emerging church that has been given by the emerging church movement:

“Emerging churches are always in the process of becoming...Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) **transform the secular realm**, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.” – Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p. 45

It’s hard not to notice from the above definition that the emerging church starts with the culture in defining “church”, rather than from the scriptures. Rather than the church being defined from outside of the culture, objectively by the founder of the church himself, Jesus Christ, church seemingly arises from inside of and is defined by the culture. Does this mean that any of these 9 are not characteristics of the church as the Bible defines it? Of course not. The problem is the starting point and the trajectory, all of which is man-centered (not to mention, again, that the purpose of the church is *not* to transform the secular realm).

This next quote is from an article written by Scot McKnight, a professor at North Park University in Chicago and a well-known author with a popular emerging blog call JesusCreed. McKnight considers himself to be part of the emerging church and in this article for Christianity Today offered what he considered to be the five main characteristics of the emerging church:

“Following are five themes that characterize the emerging movement. I see them as streams flowing into the emerging lake. No one says the emerging movement is the only group of Christians doing these things, but together they crystallize into the emerging movement... One of the streams flowing into the emerging lake is **prophetic rhetoric**. The emerging movement is consciously and deliberately provocative. Emerging Christians believe the church needs to change, and they are beginning to live as if that change had already occurred...

“A second stream of emerging water is **postmodernism**. Postmodernity cannot be reduced to the denial of truth. Instead, it is the collapse of inherited metanarratives (overarching explanations of life) like those of science or Marxism. Why have they collapsed? Because of the impossibility of getting outside their assumptions. While there are good as well as naughty consequences of opting for a postmodern stance (and not all in the emerging movement are as careful as they should be), evangelical Christians can rightfully embrace certain elements of postmodernity...

McKnight, then, begins with a presumption that it is possible for evangelical Christians to pick and choose what they like and don’t like about postmodernity, as if postmodernity in its very essence isn’t corrupt. I am not yet convinced that we can neatly save the baby and throw out the bathwater. I’m not yet convinced that there is a “middle” way... at least I have yet to see it, even in McKnight and some of the others who consider themselves evangelical theologians.

“...what most characterizes emerging is the stream best called **praxis**—how the faith is lived out. At its core, the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). Its distinctive emphases can be seen in its worship, its concern with orthopraxy, and its missional orientation... they ask these sorts of questions: Is the sermon the most important thing on Sunday morning? If we sat in a circle would we foster a different theology and praxis? If we lit incense, would we practice our prayers differently? If we put the preacher on the same level as the congregation, would we create a clearer sense of the priesthood of all believers? If we acted out what we believe, would we encounter more emphatically the Incarnation?...Many will immediately claim that we need both or that orthopraxy flows from orthodoxy. Most in the emerging movement agree we need both, but they contest the second claim: **Experience does not prove that those who believe the right things live the right way.** No matter how much sense the traditional connection makes, it does not necessarily work itself out in practice. Public scandals in the church—along with those not made public—prove this point time and again...

The first and most obvious thing to point out here is something that we affirm from scripture against what McKnight says here. The Bible tells us over and over again, especially in the teaching of Jesus that all, all, all behavior... all praxis... flows from the heart, or flows from belief. McKnight is quite mistaken on this point. And it's interesting... he bases his claim on experience (the culture) rather than the scriptures and “public scandals” are propped up as justification for jettisoning what the Bible tells us is the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It's easy to see in McKnight's statement the anthropocentric (man-centered) nature of the emerging church's understanding of the Bible and reality.

Just by their very questions (is the sermon the most important thing on Sunday morning?), once we start picking and choosing among those postmodern ideas, thoughts, ways of understanding the world, ways of understanding the church, etc., everything is on the table. And I do mean everything. Some in the emerging church claim that they are asking these questions because they want to get back to what the scriptures say about our “praxis”. Yet, it would seem by the answers they are coming up with, as far as “praxis” is concerned, that the scriptures themselves are being interpreted in a much different way. So, for the example I've mentioned, even as the Scriptures affirm that the sermon *is* the most important thing that happens when the community comes together on Sunday morning, that fundamental doctrine of how we do church is being denied. And of course, meeting on Sunday morning itself is being challenged. And on it goes. But the point here is that the motivation behind raising these types of questions is to get the church to *doubt*, a fundamental negative characteristic of the emerging movement.

To go back to Pastor Russ's sermon last week, it's the lie of the serpent in the garden: “Has God really said that you are to be a preaching community? Has God really said that you are to gather yourselves together for worship ‘at the foot of Mt. Zion’? Has God really said that you are to evangelize the unbeliever with the exclusive truth claims of the gospel?” Everything is on the table for the emerging church movement. I had one emerging leader tell me, when I put the question to him, that even “sola fide” was on the table for reconsideration. It's not just “praxis” that is being rethought... and indeed rethinking “praxis” has become a front for rethinking fun-

damental beliefs (because, contrary to McKnight's claim, praxis flows from belief, everytime, everywhere).

“ A fourth stream flowing into the emerging lake is characterized by the term **post-evangelical**. The emerging movement is a protest against much of evangelicalism as currently practiced. It is post-evangelical in the way that neo-evangelicalism (in the 1950s) was post-fundamentalist. It would not be unfair to call it postmodern evangelicalism. This stream flows from the conviction that the church must always be reforming itself. The vast majority of emerging Christians are evangelical theologically, but they are (also) post-evangelical, suspicious of systematic theology... God didn't reveal a systematic theology but a storied narrative, and no language is capable of capturing the Absolute Truth who alone is God. Frankly, the emerging movement loves ideas and theology. It just doesn't have an airtight system or statement of faith. We believe **the Great Tradition offers various ways for telling the truth about God's redemption in Christ, but we don't believe any one theology gets it absolutely right**... No systematic theology can be final. In this sense, the emerging movement is radically Reformed. It turns its chastened epistemology against itself, saying, "This is what I believe, but I could be wrong. What do you think? Let's talk."... An admittedly controversial element of post-evangelicalism is that many in the emerging movement are skeptical about the "in versus out" mentality of much of evangelicalism. Even if one is an exclusivist (believing that there is a dividing line between Christians and non-Christians), the issue of who is in and who is out pains the emerging generation...

Again, one doesn't have to read the emerging church material very long and one gets the sense that they are really upset at megachurches. Would we share some of the same critique? Yes, we do, and we have. Is the answer, then, found in postmodernism? Absolutely not.

“A final stream flowing into the emerging lake is **politics**. Tony Jones is regularly told that the emerging movement is a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing group of 21st-century, left-wing, hippie wannabes. Put directly, they are Democrats. And that spells "post" for conservative-evangelical-politics-as-usual.” – Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church”, Christianity Today, 1/19/2007

What they say right:

Questions regarding the relationship between church and culture are critical to the mission of the church. Faithful mission practice requires an understanding of the culture in which one is serving. Historically, discerning missionaries have engaged the culture, seeking to communicate the gospel in indigenous forms while remaining faithful to Scripture. Unfortunately, in the West, we often make the mistake of giving culture short shrift, convinced that we understand the various cultures within Western countries.” – Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, “Emerging Churches”, p. 17

Emphasis on missional.

Critique of megachurches.

Emphasis on community.

Emphasis on authenticity.

Emphasis on Incarnational ministry.

Emphasis on serving the less fortunate.

However, despite the fact that these sound right, in the end, they still don't define these ideas biblically and we must say that they are not yet "right" or not quite "right" in what they are saying about these things.

What does the emerging church say about certainty, doubt, and rationalism?

"We sponsored a Doubt Night at our church a while back. People were encouraged to write down whatever questions or doubts they had about God and Jesus and the Bible and faith and church... But what was so powerful for those I spoke with was that they were free to voice what was deepest in their hearts and minds. Questions, doubts, struggles. It wasn't the information that helped them - it was simply being in an environment in which they were free to voice what was inside." – Rob Bell, "Velvet Elvis", pp. 29-30

First, is it a good thing to voice what is deepest in our hearts and minds? Probably not, if we are understanding John Owen correctly as to how corrupt we are to the core. However, that's not the biggest problem with this quote. Notice he says "it wasn't the information that helped them." He claims what helps those with doubts and those with struggles is "being in an environment". Culture is king for the emerging church. Culture plays "god". And this culture, taking its cue from pagan mysticism, sends people navel-gazing for the answer to their problems and encouraging doubt (or as the scriptures speak of it, unbelief) along the way.

To that kind of thinking we must respond: What is the only thing that can help a drug addict? What is the only thing that can help someone who lost their job this week? What is the only thing that can truly help the couple headed for divorce? What is the only thing that can salve the wounded soul? The only thing that can help those with questions, struggles and doubt is the information found in Christ and His Word. What people need is information that comes from outside of themselves, and that kind of information is found only in the Person of Jesus Christ who reveals himself through His Word. It is The Word from The WORD which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Paul (and the other biblical writers) knows nothing of listening to our inner voice. In fact, Paul is convinced such an inner voice cannot help us because our depravity leaves us in a constant state of self-deception. It is only in the mirror of the Word that we find out what it is that ails us and how we are to deal with patterns of sin. It's not just that information is helpful, but a lack of information that damns us.

One of the more interesting conversations taking place on the internet is between Tony Jones, an Emergent Village leader, and Sean McDowell. Jones and McDowell are discussing the various aspects of the emerging church, one from the emergent perspective and one from the conservative perspective.

"I think it's interesting that all of your biblical references are to Paul, which is a common tendency when defending rationalistic apologetics. One would be more hard pressed to look to the ministry of Jesus and come to the same conclusions. Of course, Jesus very much tried to persuade others to join The Way, but he did so in myriad ways, by articu-

lating a beautiful vision of the Kingdom of God through words (The Sermon on the Mount), and actions (healings, hanging out with whores and tax collectors, and touching the ‘untouchables’). Ultimately, I think that you have **overdetermined the role of rationality in human communication...** , I’m trying to recover Jesus from the Paulophilia that is too often a part of evangelicalism. Sometimes I think that the book of Romans gets supremacy over the Gospels for some people.” – Tony Jones, online conversation with Sean McDowell

“...the core of the Christian faith (the facticity of the resurrection, for example) cannot be proven—no historic fact can. By falling into the paradigm of scientific proof, we will fail every time. The questions that can’t be answered are often the wrong questions. Instead of better proof, we need to help students develop their theological imaginations. By helping them to see the world in theological categories, they’ll see that scientific rationality has limits, and that biblical/theological rationality opens new vistas of understanding.” – Tony Jones, online conversation with Sean McDowell

Is Tony Jones kidding? “No historic fact” can be proven? Does he think courtrooms and juries will buy such an argument? Five minutes from now we can all pretend that this service never happened because its “facticity” cannot be proven? Here is the postmodern view that time and space are relative (Einstein is their folk-hero), and it is being applied not only to the resurrection, but also revelation. There is something to be said about the modern paradigm of “proof” as it has been applied by apologists for the resurrection. One doesn’t start with “proof”. One must start with revelation. However, the shortcomings of scientific rationality are not excuse to cast the facticity of the resurrection or revelation into doubt. And Jones won’t go there. Throughout the conversation, it is seemingly beyond Jones (and in their own respective writings, many of the others in the emerging church) to admit that the resurrection exists as a historical fact outside of ourselves. Jones apparently believes that the resurrection can only exist as it is accessed by faith. If the resurrection only exists as it is accessed by faith, and doubt always exists as a valid possibility, then for many in the emerging church, the resurrection (as an historical fact) is one of those faith affirmations that is on the table for reconsideration.

Our relationship to the resurrection does not begin in or arise from the faith community. And our insistence that the resurrection exists as an objective reality that imposes its will on us is not a modern construct... it is an assumption of an ancient text flowing from the very breath of God.

“...we’re all relativists! Each one of us, everyday, has to make decisions that are relative—that is, they’re based on a collection of choices, none of which is perfectly correct.” – Tony Jones, online conversation with Sean McDowell

“I only can know “reality” through my own perspective. **There’s no other way to know it**, or anything, for that matter. It’s also the only way I can know “facts” – through my senses and interpreted through the skrim of my own experience. Just because I point to “facts” and refer to “reality” doesn’t mean that I’m not a relativist. **I’m still appealing to facts and reality in relation to others who refer to other facts and other realities.** Sure I think that my facts and realities—and, thus, the opinions I base them on—are better. I have no trouble saying that... Similarly, **the Word of God does exist, but we are not able to access it in any objective sense.** We approach God and God’s revelation(s) through our own limited and fallible perceptions. Thus, **we do our best to construct explanations for who God is and who we are in relation to God.** And, when that fails,

we pray. As you rightly claim, there are better interpretations of reality, and of God's revelation. I aim for the better, and I want our youth to become better at their interpretation and explanation of God. But **objectivity? Sorry, it's just not possible.** Teaching kids that it is possible is deception – maybe not malicious, maybe with the best of intentions – but deception nonetheless.” – Tony Jones, online conversation with Sean McDowell

"Certainty is overrated...God calls us to faith and to seek the Kingdom...There is great danger in the quest to be right...History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren't." – Brian McLaren, cited from “The Story We Find Ourselves In”, by [Greg Warner](#)

“Imagine what it would be like to live in a world that really was God's creation. In such a world **there is nothing purely 'objective'** -- meaning there is nothing that does not have a personal value attached to it.” – Brian McLaren, “More Ready Than You Realize”, p. 94

What does the emerging church say about the Bible?

“The dance between theology and practice has been performed for all of humanity. The way we believe shapes what we do and what we do forms our belief...we have seen this integration (between theology and practice) in the history of the Christian faith – **the Scriptures come from and inform the church...**” – Doug Pagitt, “An Emergent Manifesto of Hope”, ed. Pagitt and Jones, p. 171

“The Scriptures come from and inform the church”? Such a statement, at the very least, is pure Romanism. Or it is classic liberalism. Regardless, such a statement undermines the gospel.

“...part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that ‘Scripture alone’ is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that **we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is.** So when I affirm the Bible as God's Word, in the same breath I have to affirm the when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. **When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.**” – Rob Bell, “Velvet Elvis”, pp. 67-68

“It is possible to make the Bible say whatever we want it to, isn't it?” – Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis, p. 44

“To think that I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a ‘pure’ or ‘exact’ meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to a very destructive reading of the Bible that robs it of its life and energy” – Rob Bell, “Velvet Elvis”, p. 54

“Notice what Jesus says in the book of Matthew: ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ What he is doing here is significant. **He is giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible.** He is giving them permission to say, ‘Hey, we think we missed it before on that verse, and we've recently

come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means” – Rob Bell, “Velvet Elvis”, p. 50

“The first Christians know that Jesus is for everybody, but what do they do with all of these Jewish laws they follow? So they convene a council (yeshiva in Hebrew) to discuss it. After hearing all sides of the issue, they decide to forbid (or should we say that they bind?) several things. Here is why this is so important: **They have to make decisions about what it means to be a Christian.** They actually do it. **They gather together and make interpretations of the Bible regarding what it will look like for millions of people to be Christians.**” – Rob Bell, “Velvet Elvis”, p. 51

“We have to embrace the Bible as the wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people experiencing the living God. **Doubling the one true God.**” – Rob Bell, “Velvet Elvis”, pp. 62-63

"We have to face, sadly but honestly, the reality that in many circumstances...people who ostensibly follow Jesus Christ have violated the plotline of our story, have reversed the flow of the narrative. They have acted regressively, as if (the slaughter of the Canaanites) were intended as an expression of God's desire for all time, honoring Moses above Jesus..., denying where they are in the unfolding narrative...As a result, **they have preferred to read the Bible as a timeless document rather than a timely one.** We now can look back at the narrative flow of the Bible (covering about 2,000 years from Abraham through the apostles) **and the narrative flow of how we Christians have read it** (2,000 years to the present). We see great leaders—such as St. Francis, Gandhi (**who sought to follow the way of Christ without identifying himself as a Christian**), and Martin Luther King, Jr.—whose reading and application of the Bible advanced the narrative trajectory (a useful term from Stanley Grenz)...(the Bible is) **not a look—it—up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths**, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham, into a new way of life...to be truly biblical does not mean being preoccupied with some golden age in the ancient world and God's word to people back then. It means learning from the past to let God's story, God's will, and God's dream **continue to come true** in us and our children." -- Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, pp. 170, 171

“The **things that transform us**, especially us ‘postmoderns’ **are people and experiences. Political ideologies and religious doctrines just aren’t very compelling.**” – Shane Claiborne, “The Irresistible Revolution”, p. 28

“...a reliable understanding of the nature of things comes out of a narrative – a story involving God's dealings with human beings in the rough and tumble of actual human history, including that of our own stories. A good friend of mine once said to me that **our stories are vital because they are perhaps the only thing we can say with absolute authority** – precisely because they are our stories.” – Alan Hirsch, “The Forgotten Ways”, p. 27

“It was awesome being a Jesus freak and I did it for almost a year... I was driven mostly by ideology and theology, **which isn’t very sustainable, even if they’re true.**” – Shane Claiborne, “The Irresistible Revolution”, p. 45

“Many people will feel uneasy about this close connection between faith and culture; some may even argue that their faith is based on truth unaffected by culture. But nowadays, such a naive view is impossible to sustain;

One of the things that strikes me about this quote from Tomlinson is how many times he uses the word “culture”. One of the underlying presumptions of the emerging church is that culture is a good thing. The emerging church believes that it is not only possible but a mandate for the church to shape and influence culture. Culture is not a bad thing. Over against such a thought we must insist from the Word of God that culture is not neutral. Culture itself is not a canvas upon which to paint good things and bad things. When Paul says that we live in a “present evil age”, he is making a value statement about culture. John tells us to love not the culture (“the world”) because the culture is at odds with God. The culture is against us. The Bible time and again testifies to the very “us vs. them” reality that the emerging church decries.

Much in the emerging church writings suggests that it is out to eradicate the idea that the culture is set over against the church. Again, its presumption is that the church sits inside of culture, speaking from within the culture.

“nearly all scholars, evangelical or not, argue that our whole perception of the world—including our faith—is deeply influenced by culture and language. The way we perceive the being and person of God is influenced by culture, the way we think of redemption is influenced by culture, the way we imagine heaven is influenced by culture, and the way we approach the Bible is influenced by culture. The idea that we can simply pick up the Bible and read it, apart from any cultural conditioning is, quite frankly, nonsense. In fact, a great gulf lies between the cultural world of the Bible and our own world. We can (and do) seek to bridge that gulf, with the Spirit’s illuminating help, through biblical scholarship, but the gulf is there all the same.” – Dave Tomlinson, “The Post Evangelical”, p. 28-29

This quote from Tomlinson quite simply explains why the emerging church is where it is at in its unbiblical postulations of doctrine after doctrine after doctrine. What the emerging church believes about heaven, hell, sin, Jesus, the exclusiveness of Christianity, etc. is underpinned by a presumption that the Bible is not objectively outside of the culture. In fact, the emerging church will insist that our critique of it does not reside in an objective Bible but in a viewpoint that is a slave to a particular culture. Jettison the culture, jettison a particular Biblical interpretation. In fact, for many in the emerging church, the scriptures themselves are the product of a culture, the Jewish and ancient near east culture of two to three thousand years ago. And many of them believe that the scriptures are themselves slaves to that culture and therefore must be “reimagined” in order for them to have anything to say about this culture in which we find ourselves.

“Knowing God, knowing His heart, knowing His character is really about falling passionately in love with God and experiencing His love. Of course, there are dynamics to that: the Scriptures are essential. God speaks through the cosmos, God speaks through creation, God speaks through human experience and conscience, God speaks through everything, yes—but I do see the Scriptures as the primary access, a portal into God’s presence. I began to have a clear sense of God’s voice in my life through reading the Scriptures and hearing God’s voice through the Scriptures.” – Erwin McManus, interview with Relevant Magazine

“I build my life not on the Word of God, but the voice of God. The Scriptures are to me the instrument that God has placed in history for me to learn the voice of God. I treasure the Scriptures.” – Erwin McManus, (Mosaic, Los Angeles), interview with Relevant Magazine

This is the kind of quote that “happens” when it is believed that the Bible is culturally derived. Since the Bible cannot be counted on to objectively tell me what my reality is, I must look inward. I must rely on my inner sense of “hearing”. There is a mystical element common to the emerging church that is resident in these comments. Others in the emerging church make much of hearing that “still small voice” spoken of in the Bible. And apparently, the Bible is only one means of “hearing” God’s voice, rather than THE means of hearing God’s voice.

This is the kind of quote that explains why we are spending time “hearing” the words of those who are part of the emerging (and emergent) church movement. What we understand about reality, our “knowing God”, must be given to us. Our interpretation of the world in which we live must come from outside of ourselves. We are dependent on God to give it to us and he has given it to us in His Word and His Word alone. Our salvation is not about listening to an inner voice. It is not even about listening to the Scriptures as if they are a “portal” to God. Our salvation, and indeed the nourishment for our eternal life, comes **only** from hearing the Word of God. Period. It is through the Scriptures alone that Christ gives himself to His people. It is through the scriptures that these elementary principles of the world are rebutted by Christ himself (Colossians 2). Christ himself constitutes the Argument against such humanly oriented contrivances. We must insist, from the very pages of Scripture, that Christ objectively stands outside of and above ourselves defining reality for us and giving us a knowledge of God. We will not find meaning for our community in our culture. We are dependent on Christ and Christ alone to tell us who we are and to give us meaning in our community.